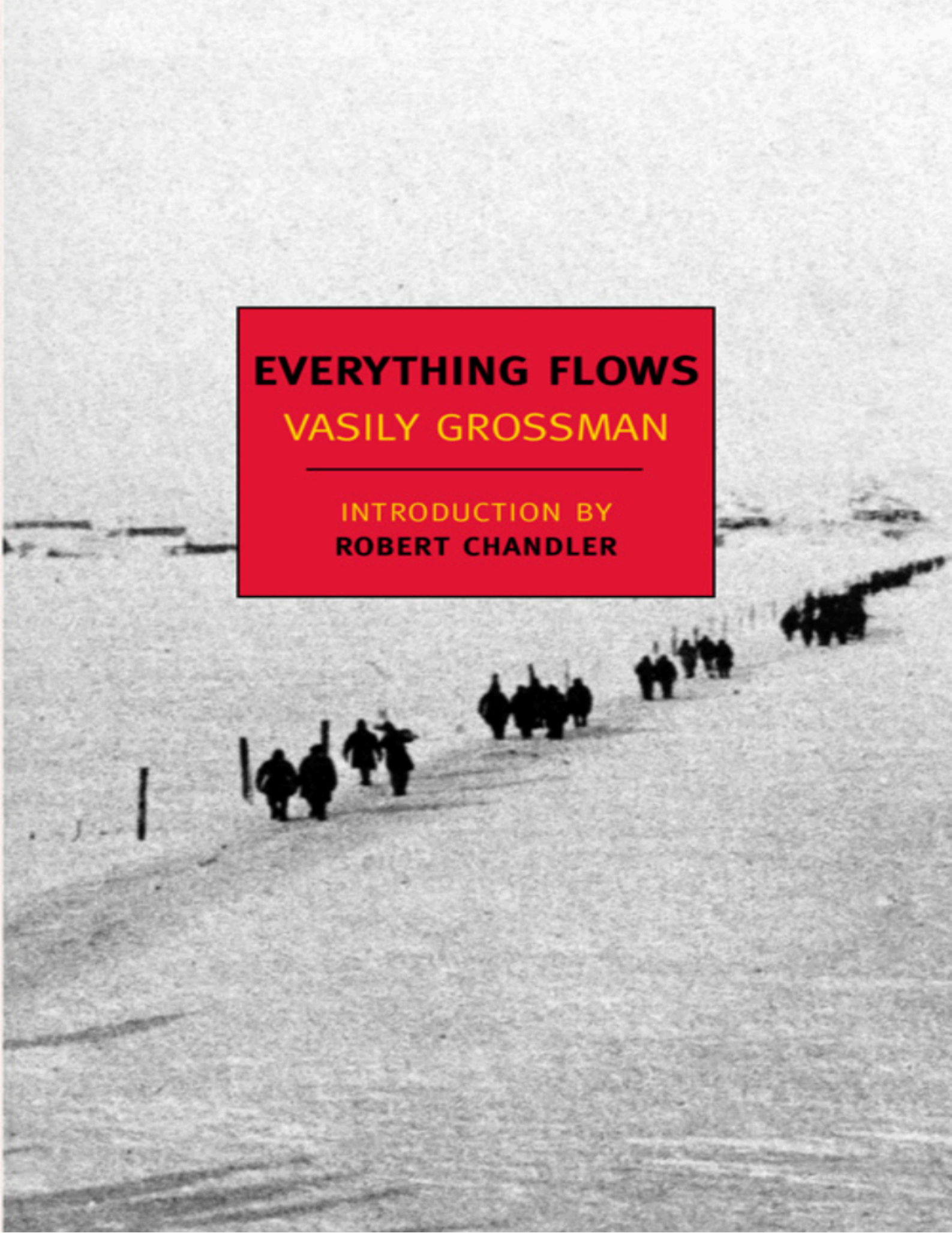
EVERYTHING FLOWS

VASILY GROSSMAN

INTRODUCTION BY
ROBERT CHANDLER



NEW YORK REVIEW BOOKS

VASILY SEMYONOVICH GROSSMAN was born on December 12, 1905, in Berdichev, a Ukrainian town that was home to one of Europe's largest Jewish communities. In 1934 he published both "In the Town of Berdichev"—a short story that won the admiration of such diverse writers as Maksim Gorky, Mikhail Bulgakov, and Isaak Babel—and a novel, *Glyukauf*, about the life of the Donbass miners. During the Second World War, Grossman worked as a reporter for the army newspaper *Red Star*, covering nearly all of the most important battles from the defense of Moscow to the fall of Berlin. His vivid yet sober "The Hell of Treblinka" (late 1944), one of the first articles in any language about a Nazi death camp, was translated and used as testimony in the Nuremberg trials. His novel *For a Just Cause* (originally titled *Stalingrad*) was published in 1952 and then fiercely attacked. A new wave of purges—directed against the Jews—was about to begin; but for Stalin'sdeath in March 1953, Grossman would almost certainly have been arrested. During the next few years Grossman, while enjoying public success, worked on his two masterpieces, neither of which was to be published in Russia until the late 1980s: *Life and Fate* and *Everything Flows*. The KGB confiscated the manuscript of *Life and Fate* in February 1961. Grossman was able, however, to continue working on *Everything Flows*, a work even more critical of Soviet society than *Life and Fate*, until his last days in the hospital. He died on September 14, 1964, on the eve of the twenty-third anniversary of the massacre of the Jews of Berdichev, in which his mother had died.

ROBERT CHANDLER's translations of Sappho and Guillaume Apollinaire are published in the series "Everyman's Poetry." His translations from Russian include Vasily Grossman's *Life and Fate*, Leskov's *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk* and Aleksander Pushkin's *Dubrovsky* and *The Captain's Daughter*. Together with his wife, Elizabeth, and other colleagues he has co-translated numerous works by Andrey Platonov. One of these, *Soul*, was chosen in 2004 as "best translation of the year from a Slavonic language" by the AATSEEL (the American Association of Teachers of Slavonic and East European Languages); it was also shortlisted for the 2005 Rossica Translation Prize and the Weidenfeld European Translation Prize. Robert Chandler's translation of Hamid Ismailov's *The Railway* won the AATSEEL prize for 2007 and received a special commendation from the judges of the 2007 Rossica Translation Prize. Robert Chandler is the editor of *Russian Short Stories from Pushkin to Buida* and the author of a biography of Alexander Pushkin.

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Everything Flows

Vasily Grossman

Translated from the Russian by Robert and Elizabeth Chandler
with Anna Aslanyan

New York Review Books
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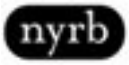

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Introduction

Vasily Grossman has become recognized not only as one of the great war novelists of all time but also as one of the first and most important of witnesses to the Shoah. “The Hell of Treblinka” (late 1944), one of the first articles in any language about a Nazi death camp, was used as testimony in the Nuremberg trials. And there may be no more powerful lament for East European Jewry than the chapter of *Life and Fate* that has become known as “The Last Letter”—the letter that Anna Semyonovna, a fictional portrait of Grossman’s mother, writes in the last days of her life and manages to have smuggled out of the Jewish ghetto of a town under Nazi occupation. This chapter has been staged as a one-woman play in Paris, New York, and Moscow.

Few novelists have incorporated more history into their novels than Grossman. *Everything Flows* is a quarter of the length of *Life and Fate*, but its historical scope is in some respects broader. The central story—about the struggle of a fifty-year-old man, Ivan Grigoryevich, to find a place for himself in post-Stalinist Russia after losing thirty years of his life to the Gulag—is interrupted by chapters about Moscow prisons in 1937, about the sufferings of women in the camps, about Stalin’s destruction of Soviet science in the late 1940s, about the anti-Jewish campaign of the early 1950s, about Lenin and Stalin and the roots of “Russian slavery.” Many of Grossman’s thoughts—especially the suggestion that Stalin was heir both to the Russian revolutionary tradition and to the Russian secret police, and that his paranoia arose in part from the conflict between these two forces within his psyche—still seem startlingly bold. The novel even has room for a small playlet, a mock trial that follows Ivan’s chance meeting with the informer responsible, long ago, for his being sent to the camps: the reader is asked to pronounce judgment on four informers, four different “Judases.” The arguments Grossman gives to both prosecution and defense are unexpected and lively; as members of the jury, we are constantly taken off guard, repeatedly forced to change our minds. The trial eventually falls apart, dissolved by the reflection that the living have, without exception, compromised themselves and that only the dead—who, of course, cannot speak—have the right to pass judgment.

Some of these digressions are introduced as Ivan’s thoughts or writings. The most powerful chapter of all, an account of the 1932–33 Terror Famine that brought about the deaths of three to five million peasants in the Ukraine, is narrated by Ivan’s landlady, Anna Sergeyevna, just after she has become his lover. Anna Sergeyevna was herself involved, as a minor Party official, in the implementation of the measures that caused this famine. She is an attractive figure, and we cannot help but identify not only with the middle-aged Anna telling the story but also with the young Anna of the time of the famine; once again, Grossman denies the reader the luxury of unalloyed indignation. This chapter about the least-known act of genocide of the last century is subtle, complex, and unbearably lucid. Only Dante, in his account of Ugolino and his sons starving to death in a locked tower, has written of death from hunger with equal power.

Almost every step of Grossman’s career—even after his death—has been marked by long delays and tedious, protracted battles. Editors, publishers, and politicians seem to have responded to the painful and intractable nature of Grossman’s subject matter with an equal intractability of their own. *For a Just Cause*, the fine but more orthodox war novel to which *Life and Fate* is a sequel, was originally titled *Stalingrad.* This title was abandoned after Mikhail Sholokhov, by then the grand old man of Soviet letters, asked at an editorial meeting, “Who gave *him* the right to write about Stalingrad?” Sholokhov’s implication, clearly understood by everyone present, was that a mere Jew had no right to be writing about one of the most glorious chapters of Russian history—let alone to be writing about it with such truthfulness. From 1949 to 1952, Grossman and his editors struggled to meet the demands of the authorities. No less than twelve sets of author’s proofs remain, and the editors of *Novy Mir* made three abortive attempts to print the novel before publishing a heavily cut version in 1952. A less cut version was published in 1954 and a full version in 1956. As for *Life and Fate* itself, not only were Grossman’s manuscripts confiscated by the KGB, but even after the satirist Vladimir Voinovich had smuggled a microfilmed text to the West, it took almost five years to find a publisher for the first Russian edition—mainly, it seems, because of anti-Semitism among Russian émigrés. Grossman’s friends and admirers were bewildered and shocked. In 1961, after what he always referred to as the “arrest” of *Life and Fate*, Grossman said it was as if he had been “strangled in a dark corner.” Dismayed at being unable to find a publisher twenty years later, Voinovich said it was as if Grossman were being strangled a second time.

Even after the first publication of translations of *Life and Fate* in the mid-1980s, Grossman’s reputation grew only slowly. Grossman would have had little time for postmodernism, and it is perhaps not surprising that postmodernism had little time for him. It may have been easier during the decade following the collapse of the Berlin Wall to imagine that we can be free of the weight of history, to believe that we need only adopt different metaphors, different visions—and reality will be transformed. Today, however, as the ecological crisis deepens and the West is drawn into one seemingly insoluble conflict after another, it is harder to doubt the stubbornness of reality—and Grossman’s realism seems more valuable than ever. Grossman is, on

occasion, both witty and joyful, but he is seldom ludic; he is not given to flights of fancy and he is linguistically inventive only when plainer, more ordinary words are inadequate. If, however, one accepts Coleridge's definition of Imagination as "the power to disimprison the soul of fact," then Grossman was endowed with an imagination of supreme power and—above all—steadiness.

It is hard to believe that a single man could possess the strength to write with such clarity about so many of the most terrible pages of twentieth-century history—the siege of Stalingrad, the Shoah, the Terror Famine. The source of such strength must remain a mystery, but Grossman himself certainly linked it to the memory of his dead mother, Yekaterina Savelievna. He felt guilty that he had not done more to save her in 1941, that he had failed to persuade her to join him in Moscow and so escape the invading German armies. This admission of guilt, however, seems not to have weakened him but to have lent him clarity and determination. This is clear from the guardedly optimistic conclusion to the story of Viktor Shtrum (in many ways a self-portrait of Grossman) in *Life and Fate*. After betraying men he knows to be innocent, Shtrum expresses the hope that his dead mother will help him to act better another time; his last words in the novel are "Well then, we'll see...Maybe I do have enough strength. Your strength, Mother..."

Grossman believed that his mother was, in some way, alive and present in the pages of *Life and Fate*. In a letter to her on the twentieth anniversary of her death, he wrote: "I am you, dear Mama, and as long as I live, then you are alive also. When I die you will continue to live in this book, which I have dedicated to you and whose fate is closely tied to your fate." Grossman's mother is no less present in *Everything Flows*. Anna Sergeyevna first comes to Ivan's bed on hearing him call out for his mother in a nightmare. And her account of the famine is similar in tone to Anna Semyonovna's last letter from the ghetto; these two chapters are among Grossman's supreme achievements, and both are laments—for millions who died, for whole worlds that were destroyed. Both chapters are historically truthful; both chapters are written with the sensitivity of a supreme poet.

Everything Flows is an unfinished work; Grossman began it in 1955 and was still revising it during his last days in the hospital in September 1964. It is unbalanced in its structure, and the burden of history it carries is so overwhelming that most novels would sink under its weight. Nevertheless, *Everything Flows* is a work of art; important though it is as a historical document, it is far more than a historical document. Even if the essays on Lenin and Stalin cause us to lose sight of Ivan Grigoryevich for most of the last quarter of the novel, and even if Ivan eventually becomes barely distinguishable from Grossman himself, Ivan's fate still moves us. And the novel's structure, however schematic, carries meaning: central to this structure is the idea that the telling of stories, of histories—the telling of my story and your story, of her story and his story—can be a gift. In the first chapters Ivan and his cousin, Nikolay, approach their long-awaited meeting with great hopes. Ivan hopes to be released from the burden of all that he has seen and suffered in the camps; Nikolay—a successful scientist—hopes to be released from the burden of the guilt he feels on account of all the compromises he has made in order to stay "free." Nikolay, however, feels threatened by Ivan's presence—and the breath of the camps he brings with him—and no real conversation, no true exchange of stories, takes place. Ivan leaves abruptly, lonelier and more burdened than ever.

In the second half of the novel, however, Ivan finds understanding and love; and the failed conversation between the two cousins is balanced by a true conversation between Ivan and his lover. Anna Sergeyevna's account of the Terror Famine—an act of genocide in which she was complicit—is a gift of love. She tells her story lucidly, with absolute trust and with absolute truthfulness. She is not trying to escape her pain by inflicting it on Ivan, nor is Grossman trying to escape his own pain by inflicting it on the reader. Grossman is simply doing what he can to remember the lives and deaths of millions who have been too little remembered.

Ivan accepts this immense gift, this gift of love and trust, and he does his best to reply in kind. Anna is taken away from him—by illness and, eventually, by death—but this does not bring an end to their conversation. Just as Grossman continued writing letters to his mother, so Ivan talks to Anna in his imagination and writes down for her—in a school exercise book that had once belonged to her nephew—his uncompromising thoughts about Lenin, Stalin, and the Russian "slave soul." Ivan fully understands the importance of this unbroken conversation; in the penultimate chapter he says to Anna, some time after she has died,

> Do you know? At the very worst times I used to imagine being embraced by a woman. I used to imagine this embrace as something so wonderful that it would make me forget everything I had been through. It would be as if none of it had ever happened. But it turns out that it's you I have to talk to, that it's you I have to tell about the very worst time of all. You yourself, after all, talked all through that first night. Happiness, it turns out, will be to share with you the burden I can't share with anyone else—the burden I can share only with you.

This exchange of gifts is not, of course, enough to save Anna's life, nor is it enough to restore the thirty years that Ivan has lost to the Gulag. It is, however, enough to validate Grossman's claim that freedom does

not die, that it is the essence of our humanity. For all the pain gathered within it, *Everything Flows* is a gift, Grossman's last gift to the world. And one of the most precious understandings it embodies is that if we can speak truthfully and trustingly, our histories can cease to be burdens. Any story, truly told and truly listened to, can become a gift.

—ROBERT CHANDLER

Everything Flows

1

The Khabarovsk express was due to arrive in Moscow by 9 a.m. A young man in pajamas scratched his shaggy head and looked out of the window into the half-light of the autumn morning. He yawned, turned to the people standing in the corridor with their soap boxes and towels, and said, “Well, citizens, who’s last in line?”

The last in the queue, he was told, was a plump woman who had gone away for a moment. She was after a man with a twisted tube of toothpaste and a piece of soap plastered with bits of newspaper. He himself would be after this woman.

“Why’s there only one washroom open?” said the young man. “We’ll be arriving soon in the capital—and the conductors are only interested in the circulation of goods: their private deals and the packages they’ve been asked to deliver. What do they care about their duties to the passengers?”

A few minutes later, a stout woman in a dressing gown appeared, and the young man said to her, “Citizen, I’m next after you. But I’ve had enough of hanging about in the corridor—I’m going to go and sit down for a moment.”

Back in his compartment the young man opened an orange suitcase and began to admire his belongings.

One of his three fellow travelers was snoring; the back of his head was broad and bulbous. A second—pink-complexioned, young-looking, but bald—was going through the papers in his briefcase. The third, a thin old man, was sitting and looking out of the window, resting his head on his brown fists.

Addressing the pink-faced man, the young man with the suitcase said, “Have you finished with my book? I need to pack it now.”

What he really wanted was for his traveling companion to admire his suitcase. In it were some viscose shirts, *A Brief Philosophical Dictionary*, a pair of swimming trunks, and sunglasses in white frames. In one corner, covered by some local newspaper or other, lay some gray village-baked shortbreads.

The pink-faced man answered, “Here you are— *Eugénie Grandet.* I realized I read it last year, when I was on holiday.”

“It’s a powerful piece of writing, there’s no denying it,” said the young man. And he packed the book away in his suitcase.

During the journey they had played cards. And while eating and drinking, they had discussed movies, records, furniture, socialist agriculture, the merits of various houses of recreation in Sochi, and which football team had the better attack— *Spartak* or *Dynamo.*

The bald man with the pink face was an inspector for the All-Union Central Council of Trade Unions; he worked in a provincial capital. The shaggy-haired young man was returning from a vacation he had spent in some village. He worked in Moscow, as an economist for *Gosplan*, the State Planning Committee.

The third traveler, the one now snoring on the lower bunk, was a Siberian construction superintendent. The two younger men disliked him because of his lack of culture; he swore, and he belched after eating. Learning that one of his fellow travelers was working in *Gosplan*, in the Economic Science Department, he had said, “Political Economy—now what exactly is all that? Tells you why collective farmers go to the city to buy bread from the workers, does it?”

Once he had got very drunk in the bar of a junction station where he had gone, as he said, “on a brief mission.” After this he had kept his fellow travelers awake for a long time, sounding off about one thing after another: “You can’t keep to the law in our line of work—or you’ll never get anything done at all. To fulfill the plan, you have to work the way life tells you to work. Yes, you have to meet life’s demands: ‘You scratch my back, and I’ll scratch yours.’ Once—under the Tsar—this was called private enterprise. The way *I* put it is ‘Let a man live—he *wants* to live!’ Yes, I could teach you a thing or two about real economics! Once I had my steel fixers registered as nursery-school staff for a whole quarter—until our new budget came through. Yes, the law tries to stop life, but life makes its demands anyway. Fulfill the plan—and you get a pay raise and a bonus. But who knows? You might end up doing ten years in the camps instead. The law fights against life, and life fights against the law.”

The two younger men said nothing. But when the construction superintendent fell silent—or, rather, when he began to snore loudly—they said what they thought of him:

“One needs to keep an eye on people like him. Behind that comradely mask...”

“A wheeler-dealer. A man without principles. Bad as a Yid.”

This man was a nobody, an uncouth nobody from the back of beyond. It was infuriating to sense that he held cultured people like them in contempt. “I’ve got prisoners working on my construction site,” he had said on one occasion. “Their name for people like you is ‘layabouts.’ But when the time comes to decide who built Communism, no doubt it’ll turn out to be you lot who did all the plowing.” And with that he had gone off to the compartment next door to play cards.

As for the fourth passenger, it seemed that he seldom traveled in a carriage with reserved seats. Most of the time he just sat there, his palms on his knees, as if wanting to hide the darns on his trousers. The sleeves of his black sateen shirt ended somewhere between his elbows and his wrists, and the white buttons on the collar and the chest made it look like the shirt of a child. There is something absurd and touching about the

combination of white, childish buttons and the gray temples and exhausted eyes of an old man.

When the construction superintendent said to him, in the voice of a man used to giving orders, “Move out of the way, Grandad—I need the table for my tea!”, the old man jumped to his feet like an obedient soldier and went out into the corridor.

Inside his plywood suitcase with its peeling paint lay a loaf of crumbling bread and some threadbare underwear. He smoked *makhorka* and, after rolling a cigarette, he would go to the platform at the end of the carriage, so as not to upset the others with his horrible smoke.

Sometimes his fellow travelers would offer him a piece of sausage; once the construction superintendent presented him with a hard-boiled egg and a glass of vodka.

Even people half his age addressed him familiarly as *Ty*, rather than politely as *Vy*. And the superintendent kept saying that when they got to Moscow, “Grandad” would pretend to be a bachelor and marry a young girl.

On one occasion the conversation turned to the subject of collective farms. The young economist began criticizing “village loafers”: “I’ve seen it now with my own eyes. In the morning they just hang about outside the farm office and scratch their arses. The collective-farm chairman and the brigade leaders have to sweat blood to get them out onto the fields. And all they do is complain. They make out that under Stalin they didn’t get paid at all, and that they hardly get paid even now.”

The trade-union inspector, thoughtfully shuffling a pack of cards, agreed with him: “And why should our dear friends be paid if they don’t keep up with their grain deliveries? They need to be taught a lesson—like this!” And he shook his white fist in the air—the strong fist of a peasant, though it had clearly not seen manual labor for many years.

The construction superintendent stroked his stout chest with its rows of greasy ribbons—he had evidently been awarded many orders and medals.

“There was bread enough for us in the army, on the front line. We were fed by the Russian people. And no one had to teach them how to do it.”

“You’re right there,” said the economist. “What matters is that we’re Russians. Yes, Russians—that’s quite something.”

The inspector smiled and winked at his companion. It was as if he were saying those well-known words: “The Russian is the elder brother, the first among equals.”

“That’s what makes one mad,” pronounced the young economist. “These peasants we’re talking about are Russians—not some national minority or other! One of them started haranguing me: ‘Five years we lived on linden leaves...Since 1947 we’ve been working without any pay...’ They just don’t want to work—and that’s all there is to it. They don’t want to understand that everything now depends on the people.”

He looked around at the gray-haired old peasant listening to the conversation in silence and said, “Don’t be angry, Grandad. The State has begun to address your needs—now it’s up to you. You must all fulfill your duty as laborers.”

“A likely story. There’s not the least consciousness in any of them—all they ever think about is food!”

This discussion—like most discussions, whether inside or outside a railway carriage—was never resolved. An air-force major with gleaming gold teeth looked into the compartment and said reproachfully to the three younger men, “Well, comrades? How about getting down to some work?”

And off they had gone to their neighbors—to finish a game of cards.

But now the long journey was nearly over. The passengers were packing away their slippers and depositing on the tables remnants of food: pieces of stale bread, chicken bones that had been gnawed till they were blue, pallid sausage ends wrapped in layers of skin.

The sullen conductors had already collected all the crumpled sheets and pillowcases.

The little world of the railway carriage was about to disperse. Jokes, faces, and laughter would all be forgotten—as would chance confidences and painful confessions.

Ever closer drew the vast city, the capital of the great State. Finished were the thoughts and anxieties of the journey. Forgotten were the tête-à-têtes at the end of the carriage with the woman from the compartment next door, while the great Russian plain rolled past before your eyes—just outside the clouded windows—and the water in the storage tanks sloshed heavily about behind your back.

The close-knit world of the railway carriage—a world that had come into being for only a few days and that was governed, on its straight or curved path through time and space, by the same laws as every other man-made world—was now melting away.

So great is the power of an enormous city that it makes every heart miss a beat—even the carefree hearts of those who are traveling to the capital to stay with friends, to roam around shops, to visit a zoo or a planetarium. Entering the force field generated by a world city, entering its taut invisible network of living energy, everyone feels a sudden moment of confusion and apprehension.

After nearly missing his place in the queue, the economist had been to the washroom. Still combing his hair, he had gone back to his seat. Now he was scrutinizing his fellow passengers.

The construction superintendent was putting his expense sheets in order. A great deal of alcohol had been drunk during the last few days, and his fingers were trembling.

The trade-union inspector had already put on his jacket. Entering into the force field of agitated human emotions, he had turned timid and silent; his supervisor, a gray-haired, bilious old witch, was sure to have a

few things to say to him.

The train rushed past brick factories and little village houses made from logs, past tin-gray fields of cabbages, past station platforms where the night rain seemed to have made gray asphalt puddles.

On the platforms stood sullen men and women from the Moscow suburbs, wearing plastic macs over their coats. Sagging beneath the gray rain clouds were high-voltage power lines. On the station sidings stood gray wagons, ominously labeled: SLAUGHTERHOUSE STATION. CIRCUIT LINE.

And the train thundered on with ever increasing speed, with a kind of malign joy. It was a speed that flattened space and time, that cleaved through them.

Resting his head on his hands, the old man was sitting at the little table and looking out of the window. Many years ago, a young man with a tousled, uncombed head of hair had sat in the same way by the window of a third-class carriage. The people then traveling with him had disappeared. He had long forgotten their faces and words. Inside his gray head, however, things had come back to life that had seemed as if they could no longer be in existence at all.

The train had already entered the Moscow greenbelt. Its gray, tattered smoke clutched at the branches of fir trees and, forced down by the rushing currents of air, streamed over the fences of dachas. How well he knew the silhouettes of these austere northern firs; how strange it was to see them beside light-blue fences, beside flower beds planted with dahlias, the peaked roofs of dachas and the colored windowpanes of their verandas.

And this man, who during three long decades had not once remembered that the world contains lilac bushes—and pansies, sandy garden paths, little carts with containers of fizzy water—this man gave a deep sigh, convinced once again that life had gone on in his absence, that life had continued.

2

After reading the telegram, Nikolay Andreyevich regretted giving the postman a tip—he had evidently delivered the telegram to the wrong address. And then Nikolay Andreyevich remembered—and gasped. The telegram must be from his cousin Ivan.

"Masha! Masha!" he called.

His wife, Maria Pavlovna, took the telegram from him. "Give me my glasses," she said. "You know I'm quite blind without them." After she had read the telegram, she said, "Well, there's not much chance of him getting a permit to live in Moscow."

"Oh, leave off...Don't talk about residence permits at a time like this!" Nikolay Andreyevich wiped his hand over his brow and added, "Just think—Vanya's coming and all he'll find here is graves, nothing but graves."

"This is going to be very awkward indeed with the Sokolovs," Maria Pavlovna said pensively. "I know we can give him his present some other way, but it's still all very unfortunate. It's an important occasion. He's going to be fifty."

"Don't worry. I'll tell them the whole story."

"And then the news that Ivan is back, and that he came here straight from the railway station, will spread from the birthday dinner to the whole of Moscow."

Nikolay Andreyevich waved the telegram in her face. "Don't you understand? Have you no idea at all how much Vanya means to me in my soul?"

He was angry with his wife. All the same petty thoughts, every one of them, had appeared in his own mind before she had said so much as a word. This had happened many times before. What he saw in his wife was his own weaknesses, though he did not understand this; he was unable to grasp that it was his own failings, rather than his wife's, that made him so very indignant. But then, because of his love for himself, he was also quick to calm down; forgiving his wife, he forgave himself.

He too could not stop thinking about Sokolov's birthday party; his stupid thoughts just wouldn't leave him alone. The news of his cousin's arrival was shocking not only in itself, but because it made the whole of his own life, in all its truth and untruth, appear before him; he felt ashamed that missing a celebration at the Sokolovs—and the Sokolovs' friendly decanter of vodka—was occasioning him so much regret.

He was ashamed of the shallowness of his thoughts; it had gone through his own mind, too, that he would have to get Ivan a residence permit—and that this would be hard work. He too had thought about how the whole of Moscow would get to hear of Ivan's return, and that, one way or another, this was sure to affect his own chances of being elected to the Academy of Sciences...

And now his wife was tormenting him, continuing to say out loud everything that was on his mind, insisting on bringing into the light of day thoughts of his that were not really thoughts at all, thoughts that were really only something chance and imaginary.

"You're very strange," he said to his wife. "You make me wish I'd received this telegram when you were out."

This was a hurtful thing to say, but she knew that Nikolay Andreyevich would immediately put his arms around her and say, "Masha, Masha, we're going to celebrate this together. Who else is there for me to celebrate it with?"

And that is just what happened. But there was still an unpleasant, long-suffering look on her face. It meant, "Your sweet talk doesn't give me the least pleasure, but I know how to be patient."

But then their eyes met, and the love between them put right everything that was wrong.

For twenty-eight years they had lived together without ever being separated; it is hard to understand or explain the relationship of people who have lived together for almost a third of a century.

She was gray-haired now; she would walk across to the window and watch as he, her gray-haired husband, got into his car. And there had been a time when they used to eat in a canteen on Bronnaya Street.

"Kolya," she said quietly. "Just think—Ivan never once saw our son. He was arrested before Valya was born. And now that he's back, Valya is already eight years in the grave."

This thought astonished her.

3

As he waited for his cousin to arrive, Nikolay Andreyevich thought about his own life. He got ready to tell his story, to make a confession to Ivan. He imagined showing Ivan his apartment. In the dining room they had a fine Turkmen rug. “Look!” he would say to Ivan. “Damned fine rug, isn’t it?” Masha had good taste, and Ivan knew very well who her father had been. And in Petersburg in the old days people had understood how to live well.

How would he find a way to talk to Ivan? Whole decades had gone by. Life had gone by. No, life had not gone by—and that was what they must talk about...Life was only just beginning!

What a meeting it would be! Ivan was arriving in Moscow at an astonishing time. There had been so many changes since the death of Stalin. And they affected everyone. Both workers and peasants. There was bread in the shops now. And Ivan was back from the camp now. As were many others. And Nikolay Andreyevich had also reached an important turning point in his life.

Ever since his student years Nikolay Andreyevich had felt dogged by bad luck. This was all the harder to bear because he was certain he deserved better. He was well educated; he worked hard; he was considered a witty raconteur; women were always falling in love with him.

He was proud to be seen as someone honorable, as a man of principle. At the same time, he was entirely free of pious hypocrisy. He enjoyed listening to a good story over a meal, and he had an excellent understanding of all the complexities of dry wines—even though he often preferred to get straight down to the vodka.

When people praised Nikolay Andreyevich, Maria Pavlovna looked at her husband with gay, angry eyes and said, “Try living under one roof with him! Then you’d get to know the real Kolya: Kolya the despot, Kolya the psychopath, Kolya the greatest egotist the world has ever seen!”

Each knew every one of the other’s failings and weaknesses, and sometimes this knowledge was more than they could bear. Sometimes it seemed it would be easier to live apart. But they were quite unable to live apart; if they had, they would have suffered terribly.

Maria Pavlovna had fallen in love with Nikolay Andreyevich when she was still a schoolgirl. And everything that thirty years ago had seemed astonishing and splendid—his voice, his big forehead, his big teeth, his smile—all of these things, with the passing of time, had become still dearer to her.

And he loved her too, but his love had changed. What had once been central in their relationship had faded into the background, and what had once seemed of lesser importance had become central.

Tall and dark-eyed, Maria Pavlovna had been a beauty. Her gestures and movements were still remarkably graceful, and her eyes had not lost their youthful charm. But what had been a flaw in her looks when she was young—the way her large lower teeth stuck out when she smiled—had become more noticeable with the years.

His continued bad luck remained a source of deep pain to Nikolay Andreyevich. At student seminars it had been the talks hastily flung together by that drunkard Pyzhov or by the red-haired Radionov that had generated excitement—not his own meticulously prepared papers.

Nikolay Andreyevich had become a senior researcher at a famous scientific institute; he had published dozens of works; he had successfully completed his doctorate. But his wife—and his wife alone—knew what torments and humiliations he continued to experience.

At the cutting edge of his area of biology there was only a small number of researchers. One was an academician, two were Nikolay Andreyevich’s juniors, and one had not even completed his candidate’s dissertation . All four respected Nikolay Andreyevich’s decency and valued him as someone to discuss their ideas with. They were friendly and well disposed toward him—but they simply, and quite sincerely, did not think of him as a scientist.

Nikolay Andreyevich was constantly aware of the aura of tension and excited admiration around these men—especially around the lame Mandelstam.

A London scientific journal had once described Mandelstam as “a scientist who is brilliantly continuing the work of the founders of contemporary biology.” Nikolay Andreyevich had felt that, had this been written about himself, he could have died of joy.

Mandelstam often behaved badly. Sometimes he was sullen and depressed; sometimes he spoke in a haughty and patronizing tone. When he got drunk at a party, he would mimic other scientists, referring to them as mediocrities and sometimes even as frauds and rogues. Nikolay Andreyevich found this extremely irritating. Mandelstam, after all, was criticizing personal friends, people whose hospitality he enjoyed: when Mandelstam was eating and drinking in someone else’s home, he probably called Nikolay Andreyevich a mediocrity and a rogue.

Nikolay Andreyevich was equally irritated by Mandelstam’s wife—a stout woman who had once been beautiful and who now, it seemed, loved only two things: card games played for money, and the scientific glory of her lame husband.

And at the same time he felt drawn toward Mandelstam. “Life is never easy,” he would say, “for people so

very special."

But when Mandelstam gave him a condescending lecture, he used to feel very upset indeed. He would come back home cursing and swearing, raging at that upstart Mandelstam.

Maria Pavlovna saw her husband as someone quite brilliant. The more Nikolay Andreyevich told her about the indifference and condescension shown by various luminaries toward him and his work, the more fervent grew her faith in him. Her admiration and faith were as necessary to him as vodka to an alcoholic. They both believed that some people are lucky, and some are unlucky, but that in other respects everyone is much the same. Mandelstam, for example, was blessed by special luck—he was a kind of Benjamin the Fortunate of the biological sciences. As for Radionov, he had as many adoring fans as if he were some famous operatic tenor—not that he looked much like one, with his snub nose and his prominent high cheekbones. Even Isaac Khavkin seemed to be blessed with good fortune—in spite of the fact that he had never completed his candidate's degree and that, being suspected of the heresy of vitalism , he had never, even at the most relaxed of times, been offered work at any research institute. Instead, although he was already gray-haired, he worked at a local bacteriological laboratory and went about in torn trousers. But there was no getting away from it—academicians used to go to him to discuss their work, and the research he conducted in his pitiful little laboratory generated considerable interest and controversy.

When the campaign against the followers of Weissman, Virchow, and Mendel began, Nikolay Andreyevich was troubled by the harshness of the punishments meted out to many of his colleagues. Both he and his wife were upset when Radionov refused to confess his errors. He was, of course, dismissed; Nikolay Andreyevich cursed his quixotic obstinacy and at the same time arranged for him to earn some money by translating English scientific texts in his own home.

Pyzhov was accused of "servility toward the West" and sent off to work in an experimental laboratory near Orenburg. Nikolay Andreyevich wrote to him and sent him books; Maria Pavlovna organized a New Year parcel for his family.

Newspapers began printing articles consisting largely of denunciations: of careerists and petty crooks who had obtained degrees, and even higher degrees, through fraud; of doctors guilty of criminal cruelty toward sick children and women in childbirth; of engineers who had built dachas for themselves and their relatives when they were supposed to be building schools and hospitals. Nearly everyone denounced in these articles was a Jew, and their names and patronymics were cited with unusual punctiliousness: Srul Nakhmanovich...Khaim Abramovich...Israel Mendelevich...A hostile review of a book by a Jewish writer with a Russian pseudonym would include, between brackets, the writer's original Jewish surname. Throughout the whole of the USSR it seemed that only Jews thieved and took bribes, only Jews were criminally indifferent toward the sufferings of the sick, and only Jews published vicious or badly written books.

Nikolay Andreyevich was aware that it was not only street sweepers and drunks on suburban trains who enjoyed these articles. He himself was appalled by them—and yet he felt annoyed with his Jewish friends who seemed to look on these scribblings as portents of the end of the world and who were always lamenting that talented young Jews were not being accepted as graduate students, that they were being barred from university physics departments, that they no longer seemed eligible for jobs in ministries or in heavy—or even light—industry, and that Jews graduating from institutes of higher education were all being sent to work in the most far-flung parts of the Soviet Union. And whenever staff reductions were being made anywhere, it was always the Jews who had to go.

All this, of course, was quite true, but the Jews all seemed to believe in the existence of some grand State plan that doomed them to hunger, impoverishment of every kind, and death. Nikolay Andreyevich, on the other hand, thought it was all just a matter of a hostile attitude toward Jews on the part of a certain proportion of Party and Soviet officials. He did not believe that any special instructions with regard to Jews had been issued to personnel departments or admissions committees of institutes of higher education. Stalin was not himself anti-Semitic and, in all probability, knew nothing about any of this.

And in any case it was not only Jews who were having a hard time. Old Churkovsky, and Pyzhov, and Radionov had suffered too.

Mandelstam, who had been the head of the research division, was demoted to a post in the same department as Nikolay Andreyevich. Nevertheless, he was able to continue his work, and the fact that he had a doctorate entitled him to a good salary.

But then came an unsigned editorial in *Pravda* about the contempt for Russian theater exhibited by Gurvich, Yuzovsky, and other "cosmopolitan" theater critics. This marked the beginning of a vast campaign to unmask "cosmopolitans" in all areas of art and science, and Mandelstam was declared an "anti-patriot." In an article for the Institute's "wall newspaper," Bratova, a scientist then working on her doctorate, wrote an article with the title "Ivan, Who Has Forgotten His Relatives." It began with the words, "On returning from his travels to distant parts, Mark Samuilovich Mandelstam has thrown to the winds the principles of Russian Soviet Science..."

Nikolay Andreyevich went to visit Mandelstam at his home. Mandelstam was upset. He was moved, though, that Nikolay Andreyevich had come to see him, and his haughty wife no longer seemed so very haughty. The two men drank vodka together. Mandelstam roundly cursed Bratova, who was his own student. His head in his hands, he lamented about how his students, his talented Jewish students, were all being driven out of

science. “What are they supposed to do now?” he asked. “Sell haberdashery from stalls in bazaars?”

“Come on now, it’s not as bad as all that,” said Nikolay Andreyevich. “There’ll be work enough for everyone,” he went on jokingly. “For you, and for Khavkin, and even for Anechka Silberman the lab technician. There’ll be bread for all of you—and with a bit of caviar too!”

“Heavens!” said Mandelstam. “What’s caviar got to do with it? We’re talking about human dignity.”

As regards Khavkin, Nikolay Andreyevich had soon been proved wrong. Things had taken a bad turn for him. Not long after the publication of the article about the Killer Doctors Khavkin had been arrested.

That article—about the monstrous crimes committed by Jewish doctors, and by Solomon Mikhoels, the Jewish actor—had shocked everyone. It was as if there were a dark cloud over Moscow, creeping into homes and schools, creeping into human hearts.

On page four, under the heading “Chronicle,” there had been a statement to the effect that all the accused had confessed during the investigation. There could be no doubt; the doctors were criminals.

Nevertheless, it had seemed unthinkable. It was hard to breathe; it was hard to go about one’s work in the knowledge that professors and academicians had become poisoners, that they had murdered Zhdanov and Shcherbakov.

When Nikolay Andreyevich thought about dear Doctor Vovsi, and about the brilliant Solomon Mikhoels, the crime they were accused of seemed unimaginable.

But these people had confessed! And if they were innocent but had confessed anyway, that implied another crime. It implied that they were the victims of a crime still more terrible than the crime of which they were accused.

Even to think about this was frightening. It took courage to doubt their guilt. If they were not guilty, it was the leaders of the socialist State who were the criminals. If the doctors were not guilty, then Stalin himself was a criminal.

Meanwhile, doctors he knew were now saying that it had become painfully difficult for them to carry on with their work in hospitals and polyclinics. The terrifying official announcements had made patients suspicious, and many people were refusing to be treated by Jewish doctors. The authorities were receiving countless complaints and denunciations with regard to intentional malpractice on the part of Jewish doctors. Jewish pharmacists were being suspected of trying to pass off poisons as medicines. Stories were being told in trams, in bazaars, in public institutions of all kinds, about how a number of Moscow pharmacies had been closed down because the pharmacists—Jews working as undercover American agents—were selling pills made of dried lice. There were stories about maternity hospitals where women in childbirth and newborn babies were being infected with syphilis, about dental surgeries where patients were injected with cancer of the tongue and of the jaw. There was talk of boxes of matches imbued with deadly poison. Some people began recalling suspicious circumstances around the deaths of long-dead relatives and writing to the security organs, demanding the investigation and arrest of the Jewish doctors responsible. It was especially sad that these rumors were believed not only by street sweepers, not only by semiliterate and semi-alcoholic porters and drivers but also by writers, engineers, and university students, even by certain scholars and scientists with doctorates.

Nikolay Andreyevich found this general atmosphere of suspicion unbearable. Anna Naumovna, the large-nosed laboratory technician, was coming into work every day looking pale, with mad, dilated eyes. One day she reported that a woman in her apartment, who worked in a pharmacy, had had a moment of forgetfulness and given a patient the wrong medicine. On receiving a summons to explain herself, she had felt so appalled that she had committed suicide; her two children—a girl studying at a music college and a boy who was still at school—were now orphans. Anna Naumovna had herself started coming to work on foot—because of the drunks in the trams who kept starting conversations with her about the Jewish doctors who had murdered Zhdanov and Shcherbakov.

Nikolay Andreyevich felt horrified and disgusted by the new Institute director, Ryskov. Ryskov kept saying that the time had come to purge Russian science of non-Russian names. On one occasion he declared, “Our science will no longer be a Yid synagogue. If only you knew how I hate them!”

Nevertheless, Nikolay Andreyevich was unable to suppress a sense of involuntary joy when Ryskov said to him, “The comrades in the Central Committee value your work, the work of a great Russian scientist.”

Mandelstam was no longer working at the Institute, but he had managed to find work as an adviser at a workplace training center. Now and again Nikolay Andreyevich would tell his wife to ring him up and invite him over. He was glad that Mandelstam, who had become nervous and suspicious, kept postponing their meetings—which he himself was now finding more and more painful. At times like this it was better to be among people who enjoyed life.

When Nikolay Andreyevich heard that Khavkin had been arrested, he glanced anxiously at the telephone and said to his wife in a whisper, “I’m certain that Isaac is innocent. I’ve known him for thirty years.”

Maria Pavlovna suddenly embraced him and stroked his head. “I’m proud of you,” she said. “I know how much you put yourself out for Khavkin and Mandelstam—and only I know how much they’ve hurt you.”

But it was a difficult time. Nikolay Andreyevich had to speak at a public meeting; he had to say a few words about vigilance, and about the dangers of gullibility and complacency.

After the meeting Nikolay Andreyevich had a conversation with Professor Margolin who worked in the

Physical Chemistry Department and who had also given an important speech. Margolin had demanded that the criminal doctors be sentenced to death, and he had read out the text of a congratulatory telegram to be sent to Lydia Timashuk, who had unmasked the Killer Doctors and who had just been awarded the Order of Lenin. This Margolin was an expert on Marxist philosophy; he was in charge of the lectures devoted to the study of the fourth chapter of Stalin's *Short Course* .

"Yes, Samson Abramovich," said Nikolay Andreyevich. "These are difficult times. I'm finding it hard enough myself, but you must be finding it still harder."

Margolin raised his fine eyebrows. Pushing forward his thin, pale lower lip, he said, "Excuse me. I don't quite understand what you mean."

"Oh, I just, I just mean in a general sense," said Nikolay Andreyevich. "Vovsi, Etinger, Kogan—who could have imagined it? I was once an in-patient of Vovsi's myself. The staff loved him, and the patients trusted him as if he were the Prophet himself."

Margolin raised a thin shoulder, twitched a pale, bloodless nostril, and said, "Ah, I see. You think that it must be unpleasant for me, as a Jew, to say what I think of these monsters. On the contrary, I loathe Jewish nationalism more than anyone does. And if Jews with a leaning toward America become an obstacle on the road toward communism, then I shall be merciless—even toward myself, even toward my own daughter."

Nikolay Andreyevich realized that he should not have talked about how much Vovsi was loved by his gullible patients. If a man could speak like this about his own daughter, then it was best to speak to him in the language of official formulas.

And Nikolay Andreyevich said, "Yes, of course. What ensures our enemy's doom is our own moral and political unity."

Yes, it was indeed a difficult time—and Nikolay Andreyevich's only consolation was that his work was going well.

It was as if, for the first time, he had burst out of the narrow space of his guild and into domains of the real world where he had previously not been admitted. People were seeking him out, seeking his advice; they were grateful when he told them his views. Scientific journals that had usually ignored him began to take an interest in his articles. He even received a telephone call from the All-Union Society for Cultural Ties with Foreign Countries, an institution that had never before contacted him. He was asked to send them the manuscript of a still-unfinished book so that they could look into the question of its publication in the People's Democracies.

Nikolay Andreyevich was deeply moved by the advent of his success. Maria Pavlovna took it more calmly. What had happened was inevitable; it was, she thought, simply impossible for it not to have happened.

Meanwhile, the number of changes in his life only increased. He still did not like the new people at the head of the Institute. Even though they were promoting him and his work, he was repelled by their coarseness, by their extraordinary self-assurance, by their readiness to call their opponents toadies, cosmopolitans, capitalist agents, and hirelings of imperialism. Nevertheless, he was able to see in them what was most truly important: their boldness and strength.

And as for Mandelstam—Mandelstam was wrong to refer to these people as illiterate idiots, as "dogmatic young stallions." What he himself saw in them was not narrowness but passion and purpose—a clarity of purpose that was born of life and oriented toward life. That was why they hated abstract theoreticians, hair-splitting *talmudists.*

And although these new bosses sensed that Nikolay Andreyevich was not the same as them, that he was someone who thought and behaved very differently from them, they still thought well of him and had confidence in him: he was a Russian! He received a warm letter from Lysenko, who thought very highly of his manuscript and suggested that the two of them work together.

Nikolay Andreyevich had no time for the theories of the famous agronomist, but this letter still brought him great pleasure. And it was wrong to reject all of Lysenko's work out of hand. And the rumors about his dangerous readiness to resort to "police methods," to denounce any scientists who disagreed with him—these rumors were probably exaggerated.

Ryskov had invited Nikolay Andreyevich to give a paper debunking the scientific work of the cosmopolitans who had been driven out of the biological sciences. Nikolay Andreyevich kept refusing, although he was aware how much this annoyed Ryskov. The director wanted the public to hear the wrathful voice of a Russian scientist who was not a Party member.

It was around this time that rumors began to circulate about the construction in eastern Siberia of a vast city of camp barracks. These barracks, evidently, were for the Jews. They were to be deported—just as the Kalmyks, the Crimean Tatars, the Bulgarians, the Greeks, the Balkhars, the Chechens, and the Volga Germans had already been deported.

Nikolay Andreyevich understood that he had been wrong to promise Mandelstam bread and caviar.

He felt troubled and anxious. Every morning he looked through the papers to see if the trial of the Killer Doctors had begun yet. Like everyone else, he tried to guess whether or not it would be an open, public trial. He kept asking his wife, "What do you think? Will they publish day-by-day reports, with transcripts of the prosecutor's speech and of cross-examinations, with final statements by the accused? Or will there just be a communiqué giving us the verdict of a military tribunal?"

On one occasion Nikolay Andreyevich was told, in the strictest confidence, that the doctors would be executed in public on Red Square. After this a wave of pogroms would sweep through the entire country and —to protect them from the just but merciless rage of the people—the Jews would all be deported to Siberia and to Turkmenistan, to work on the construction of the Turkmen canal through the Kara-Kum desert.

And this mass deportation would be an expression of the eternally vital spirit of internationalism which, while understanding the wrath of the people, could not tolerate lynchings and mob law.

Like everything else that took place in the Soviet Union, this upsurge of spontaneous fury had been conceived and planned well in advance.

Elections to the Supreme Soviet were planned by Stalin in exactly the same way; information was collected, deputies were chosen—and from then on the spontaneous nomination of these deputies went ahead as planned, as did their election campaigns and eventual victory in national elections. Stormy protest meetings were planned in exactly the same way—as were outbursts of popular fury and emotional expressions of brotherly friendship. And in the same way, several weeks before the May Day parades, officials gave their approval to the texts of journalists' reports from Red Square: "At this moment I am watching the tanks race by..." It was in this way that the personal initiatives of Izotov, Stakhanov, and Dusya Vinogradova were planned; it was in this way that millions of peasants chose to join the collective farms; it was in this way that legendary heroes of the Civil War were brought into the limelight or faded into the background; it was in this way that workers came to demand the issue of State loans or the abolition of days off work; it was in this way that the entire nation's love for its great Leader was organized; it was in this way that secret foreign agents, spies and saboteurs were chosen—and it was in this way, after long and complex interrogations, that accountants, engineers and lawyers who until recently had not for one moment suspected themselves of counterrevolutionary activity came to sign statements confessing to all kinds of acts of espionage and terrorism. This was how great writers beloved of the people were chosen; this was how editors chose the texts of moving appeals, addressed to young sons fighting on the front line, to be read into microphones by wooden-voiced mothers; this was how Ferapont Golovaty's sudden patriotic initiative was planned; this was how Party officials chose people to participate in free and open discussions if, for some reason, free and open discussions were called for; this was how the texts of their speeches were carefully coordinated in advance.

And then, all of a sudden, on March 5, 1953, Stalin died. This death was like an invasion; it was a sudden irruption into this vast system of mechanized enthusiasm, of carefully planned popular wrath, of popular love that had been organized in advance by district Party committees.

Stalin's death was not part of any plan; he died without instructions from any higher authority. Stalin died without receiving personal instructions from comrade Stalin himself. In the freedom and capriciousness of death lay something explosive, something hostile to the innermost essence of the Soviet State. Confusion seized minds and hearts.

Stalin had died! Some were overcome by grief. There were schools where teachers made their pupils kneel down; kneeling down themselves, and weeping uncontrollably, they then read aloud the government bulletin on the death of the Leader. Many people taking part in the official mourning assemblies in institutions and factories were overcome by hysteria; women cried and sobbed as if out of their minds; some people fainted. A great god, the idol of the twentieth century, had died, and women were weeping.

Others were overcome by joy. Villages that had been groaning beneath the iron weight of Stalin's hand breathed a sigh of relief.

And the many millions confined in the camps rejoiced.

Columns of prisoners were marching to work in deep darkness. The barking of guard dogs drowned out their voices. And suddenly, as if the northern lights had flashed the words through their ranks: "Stalin has died." As they marched on under guard, tens of thousands of prisoners passed the news on in a whisper: "He's croaked...he's croaked..." Repeated by thousand upon thousand of people, this whisper was like a wind. Over the polar lands it was still black night. But the ice in the Arctic Ocean had broken; you could now hear the roar of an ocean of voices.

Many working people, many scholars and scientists, felt both grief and the wish to dance with joy.

Their confusion had begun when they first heard on the radio the bulletin about Stalin's health: "Cheyne-Stokes respiration...urine...pulse...blood pressure..." A godlike sovereign had suddenly turned out to possess weak and aging flesh.

Stalin Had Died! In this death lay an element of sudden and truly spontaneous freedom that was infinitely alien to the nature of the Stalinist State.

The State was shaken, just as it had been shaken by the shock of the German invasion of June 22, 1941.

Millions of people wanted to see the deceased. All of Moscow, all of the surrounding provinces, was flooding toward the House of Unions, toward the Hall of Columns. Outside the city, lines of trucks stretched for miles and miles.

The roads were jammed as far south as Serpukhov—and then as far as Tula, more than a hundred miles from Moscow.

Millions of people were going on foot, all heading for the city center. Streams of people, like black, brittle rivers, clashed against one another, were squashed and flattened against stone walls; they twisted and crushed cars; they tore iron gates off their hinges.

Thousands perished that day. The tragedy of Khodynka, on the day of the coronation of Nicholas II, paled into insignificance in comparison with the death day of the earthly Russian god, the pockmarked cobbler's son from the town of Gori.

People seemed to go to their death in a state of enchantment, in some kind of Christian, Buddhist, or mystical acceptance of doom. It was as if Stalin—the great shepherd—were gathering up the sheep that had not yet been gathered, posthumously excluding any element of chance from his terrible general plan.

Stalin's comrades-in-arms read the horrifying bulletins from the Moscow police stations and morgues and looked at one another. Their deep confusion was also linked to a feeling entirely new to them; they no longer feared the inescapable wrath of the great Stalin. The boss was dead.

A month later, on April 5, Nikolay Andreyevich woke his wife with a wild cry, "Masha! The doctors are innocent! Masha, they were tortured!"

The State had acknowledged its own terrible guilt. It had admitted that the imprisoned doctors had been subjected to "impermissible means of interrogation."

After the first moments of clarity and happiness, Nikolay Andreyevich unexpectedly began to experience a turbid, aching feeling that he had never known before.

It was a new, strange, and very particular sense of guilt—guilt with regard to his own moral weakness, to his speech at the meeting, to his having signed the collective letter denouncing the monster doctors, and to his willingness to consent to an obvious lie. Guilt with regard to the genuineness and sincerity of his consent; it had come from the bottom of his heart.

Had he lived right? Was he really, as everyone around him seemed to think, an honest man?

This aching sense of repentance grew only stronger.

Now that the divinely impeccable State was repenting of its crimes, Nikolay Andreyevich began to sense that the State's body, the State's flesh, was in fact mortal and earthly. It too, like Stalin, suffered heart tremors; it too had albumen in its urine.

The divine impeccability of the immortal State turned out not only to have suppressed individual human beings but also to have defended them, to have comforted them in their weakness, to have justified their insignificance. The State had taken on its iron shoulders the entire weight of responsibility; it had liberated people from the chimera of conscience.

And Nikolay Andreyevich felt as if he had been undressed, as if thousands of strange eyes were looking at his naked body.

The worst thing was that he too was there in the crowd, looking at his own naked body. Along with everyone else, he was studying his breasts, which hung down like an old woman's, his wrinkled stomach, which had been stretched by overeating, and the folds of fat on his flanks.

Yes, Stalin had had an irregular, filiform pulse; the State had excreted urine; and beneath his expensive suit Nikolay Andreyevich turned out to have been naked.

Examination of one's own self—how very unpleasant it was. The list of despicable acts was unbelievably vile.

It included general meetings of the Institute; sessions of the scientific council; solemn meetings on important anniversaries; routine briefings in the laboratory; little articles; two books; banquets; celebrations in the homes of the important and evil; voting in elections; jokes told during dinners; conversations with the directors of personnel departments; letters he had signed; an audience with the minister.

But the scroll of his life contained all too many letters of another kind: letters unwritten, although God commanded that they should have been written. Silence when God commanded that a word be said; a telephone number it was imperative to ring, and that he had not rung; visits it was sinful not to pay, and that he had not paid; telegrams never sent; money never sent. Many, many things were missing from the scroll of his life.

And now that he was naked, it was absurd to take pride in what he had always prided himself on: that he had never denounced anyone; that he had refused, when summoned to the Lubyanka, to provide compromising information about an arrested colleague; that instead of turning away when he happened to meet the wife of an exiled colleague, he had shaken her hand and asked after the health of their children.

No, he did not have so very much to feel proud about...

His entire life had been a single act of obedience, with not one moment of refusing to obey.

And as for Ivan—Ivan had spent three decades in prisons and camps, and Nikolay Andreyevich, who had always felt proud about not having officially disowned Ivan, had not written him even a single letter. And when Nikolay Andreyevich had once received a letter from Ivan, he had asked his elderly aunt to reply.

What had once seemed entirely natural had now begun to trouble him, to gnaw at him.

He remembered how in 1937, at a meeting called in connection with the Moscow Trials, he had voted in favor of the death penalty for Rykov and Bukharin.

He had not thought about those meetings for seventeen years.

At the time he had found it strange, even crazy, that the poet Boris Pasternak, and a Mining Institute professor whose name he had forgotten, had refused to vote for the death penalty. The criminals had, after all, confessed during the trials. They had been questioned in public by a man with a university degree, Andrey Yanuaryevich Vyshinsky. There had been no doubt about their guilt, not a shadow of a doubt.

But now—now Nikolay Andreyevich remembered that there had been doubt; his certainty of Bukharin's guilt had been a pretense. Even if he had been certain, in his heart and soul, of Bukharin's complete innocence, he would still have voted for the death penalty—and so it had been easier for him not to doubt, to pretend to himself that he had no doubts. It was impossible for him not to vote for the death penalty; he believed, after all, in the ideals of the Party of Lenin and Stalin.

He believed, after all, that a socialist society, a society without private property, had been constructed for the first time in history, and that socialism required the dictatorship of the State. To have the least doubt about Bukharin's guilt, to have refused to vote, would have meant that he had doubts about this mighty State and its great ideals.

But still, somewhere in the depth of his soul, there was doubt—even with regard to this sacred faith.

Could this really be socialism—with the labor camps of Kolyma, with the horrors of collectivization, with the cannibalism and the millions of deaths during the famine? Yes, there were times when a very different understanding had found its way into the borderlands of his consciousness: that the Terror really had been very inhuman, that the sufferings of the workers and peasants had been very great indeed.

Yes, his whole life had passed by in obeisance, in a great act of submission, in fear of hunger, torture, and forced labor in Siberia. But there had also been a particularly vile fear—the fear of receiving not black caviar but red caviar, mere salmon caviar, in his weekly parcel of food from the Institute. And this vile, "caviar" fear had co-opted his adolescent dreams from the time of War Communism; it had made use of them for its own shameful ends. What mattered was to have no doubts or hesitations; what mattered was to give his vote, to sign his name, without a second thought. Yes, yes, what had nourished his unshakable ideals was two very different fears: fear for his own skin—of being skinned alive—and fear of losing his entitlement to a bit of black caviar.

And suddenly the State had trembled. Under its breath it had muttered the truth—that the doctors had been tortured. And tomorrow the State would admit that Bukharin, Zinoviev, Kamenev, Rykov, and Pyatakov had been tortured, and that Maksim Gorky had not been killed by enemies of the people. And the day after tomorrow it would admit that the lives of millions of peasants had been destroyed for no reason.

And it would turn out that it was not, after all, the omnipotent and impeccable State that would be taking responsibility for the crimes that had been committed. It was Nikolay Andreyevich who would have to answer for them—and *he* had had no doubts, *he* had voted for everything, *he* had signed everything. He had learned to pretend to himself so well, so skillfully that nobody, not even he himself, had noticed that he was pretending. He had, in all sincerity, prided himself on his faith and purity.

There were moments when his self-contempt became so overwhelming that he began to feel bitterly, piercingly resentful toward the State itself: Why, why had it confessed? It should have kept its mouth shut. It had no right to confess; everything should have been left as it was.

What must it be like now for Professor Margolin, who had said that he would be prepared, for the sake of the great internationalist cause, to put to death not only the Killer Doctors but even his own little Yid children.

Those many years of base submissiveness were too great a burden for his conscience to bear.

Gradually, however, this weight of depression began to lighten. Everything seemed to have changed and, at the same time, not to have changed at all.

The atmosphere of the Institute grew incomparably calmer and easier. This change became all the more tangible when Ryskov was dismissed from his post as director after irritating his superiors with his general rudeness.

And Nikolay Andreyevich finally achieved the success of which he had always dreamed; it was a true, important success—not just a matter of being recognized by officials and bureaucrats. It made itself felt in all kinds of ways: in journal articles; in remarks made by speakers at conferences; in the admiring looks of female colleagues and laboratory assistants; in the letters he now began to receive.

Nikolay Andreyevich was appointed to the Institute's Higher Academic Council . Soon afterward, the presidium of the Academy of Sciences confirmed his appointment as the Institute's scientific director.

Nikolay Andreyevich wanted to bring back the "idealists" and "cosmopolitans" who had been expelled, but he found himself unable to get the better of the head of the personnel department—a woman who was charming and pretty, but terribly obstinate. All he could do was to provide them with piecework.

Looking at Mandelstam now, Nikolay Andreyevich wondered how this pitiful, helpless figure, coming in to deliver a package of abstracts and translations, could have been described only a few years ago, in the foreign press, as a very important—perhaps even great—scientist. Had he himself really longed so desperately for this man's approval?

In the past Mandelstam had dressed carelessly, but now he came to the Institute in his best suit.

Once Nikolay Andreyevich made a joke about this, and Mandelstam answered, "An unemployed actor must always be well dressed."

And now, as he recollected his past life, the thought of the coming meeting with Ivan filled him with a strange feeling, with a mixture of joy and bitterness.

The general view in his family had been that Vanya was the most talented and intelligent of his generation, and Nikolay Andreyevich had accepted this. Or rather, deep in his heart, he had not accepted this view at all;

he had merely submitted to it.

Vanya had used to read through great volumes of math and physics quickly and easily, not just absorbing what was written like an obedient schoolboy but understanding them in his own particular way. He had shown a talent for sculpture even as a child; he had the ability to notice a facial expression, an unusual gesture, the essence of a particular movement—and to reproduce them in clay in a really quite lifelike manner. Most unusually of all, his interest in mathematics coexisted with a fascination for the ancient Near East. He had a good knowledge of what had been written about Parthian manuscripts and monuments.

His character, ever since childhood, had been made up of traits that could never, it seemed, have been found in one and the same person.

During a fight at secondary school he—small as he was—had bloodied his opponent's head so badly that he had been held at the police station for two days. And at the same time he was timid, shy, and sensitive. In a cellar he had set up a hospital for unfortunate animals—a dog that had lost one paw, a blind tomcat, a sad jackdaw with a torn-off wing.

As a student, Ivan had been an equally strange compound of, on the one hand, refined sensitivity, kindness, and shyness and, on the other hand, a merciless sharpness that evoked resentment even in those who were closest to him.

It may have been because of these very traits that Ivan failed to justify people's hopes. His life had been broken, and it was he himself who had done the most to break it.

During the 1920s many talented young people were denied higher education because of their social origin. The children of the nobility, of priests, of factory owners, and of merchants were all unable to study.

But Ivan's parents were educated working class, and he was able to go to a university. And he was not affected by the harsh purge of the socially alien.

And had he been beginning his life now, he would not have had any problems when he came to point five (nationality) of the countless questionnaires one had to fill in.

But had Ivan been beginning his life now, he would, probably, once again have chosen the path of failure.

It was evidently not a matter of external circumstances. It was Ivan, Ivan himself, who was responsible for his misfortunes, for his bitter fate.

In a philosophy discussion group at the university he had had fierce arguments with the teacher of dialectical materialism. The arguments had continued until the discussion group was shut down.

Then Ivan had spoken out against dictatorship in one of the lecture halls. He had declared that freedom is as important a good as life itself, that any limitation of freedom mutilates a person as surely as an ax blow to a finger or an ear, and that the annihilation of freedom is the equivalent of murder. After this, he had been expelled from the university and exiled for three years to Kazakhstan, to the province of Semipalatinsk.

All that had happened around thirty years ago, and since then Ivan had not, it seemed, spent more than a year as a free man. Nikolay Andreyevich had last seen him in 1936, not long before his final arrest, after which he had been in the camps for nineteen years at a stretch.

His childhood friends and student comrades had remembered him for a long time. "By now, Ivan would have been a member of the Academy of Sciences," they used to say. Or, "Yes, there was no one like him, but then, of course, he was unlucky." Some said, "But all the same, he's mad."

Anya Zamkovskaya, Ivan's love, had probably remembered him longer than anyone else.

But time had done its work and Anya, or rather, Anna Vladimirovna, by now gray-haired and in poor health, no longer asked after Ivan when Nikolay Andreyevich happened to meet her.

He had slipped away, out of people's minds, out of cold hearts and warm hearts alike. He existed in secret, finding it ever harder to appear in the memories of those who had known him.

Time worked unhurriedly, conscientiously. First the man was expelled from life, to reside instead in people's memories. Then he lost his right to residence in people's memories, sinking down into their subconscious minds and jumping out at someone only occasionally, like a jack-in-the-box, frightening them with the unexpectedness of his sudden, momentary appearances.

Time carried on with its extraordinarily simple work, and Ivan had already lifted one foot, about to leave the dark cellar of his friends' subconscious minds and take up permanent residence in nonbeing, in eternal oblivion.

But a new, post-Stalin time began, and fate decreed that Ivan should step back into the life that no longer thought of him and no longer knew what he looked like.

4

He did not arrive until evening.

There were many elements to their meeting. There was irritation because the lavish meal had been left so long on the table; there was anxious excitement; there were exclamations about gray hair, about wrinkles, about all the years that had passed. And Nikolay Andreyevich's eyes grew moist, the way water suddenly rushes into a dry ravine after a storm, and Maria Pavlovna began to weep, once again experiencing the funeral of her son.

The dark, wrinkled face, the Hessian jacket padded with cotton wool, the clumsy soldier's boots of the man from the camps—none of this fitted easily into a world of parquet floors and bookshelves, of pictures and chandeliers.

Suppressing his agitation, looking at his cousin through eyes dimmed by tears, Ivan Grigoryevich said, "Nikolay, let me say first of all that I won't be asking anything of you. I won't be asking for money, or for help with getting a residence permit, or for anything else. And by the way, I've already been to the bathhouse, I won't be bringing lice or any other forms of life into your house."

Wiping away tears of his own, Nikolay Andreyevich began to laugh. "Gray-haired and wrinkled—but our Vanya, our dear Vanya, is still the same as ever."

He traced a circle in the air and then jabbed one finger through this imaginary circle.

"Unbearably direct, straight as a pole, and at the same time—God knows how—kind and good!"

Maria Pavlovna looked at her husband. Only that morning she had been trying to convince him that Ivan Grigoryevich really ought to go the bathhouse to wash: a home bathtub just wasn't the same—and if Ivan did use their bath, they'd never be able to get the bath properly clean again, neither with acid nor with lye.

There was matter of consequence in their inconsequential conversation. There were smiles, looks, hand movements, little coughs; all this helped to explain, to clarify, to reveal.

Nikolay Andreyevich wanted very much to talk about himself—more than he wanted to recall their childhood, or to list relatives who had died, or to question Ivan. But since he was someone polite—since he knew how to say and do things he did not want to say or do—he said, "We ought to go and stay in a dacha somewhere, somewhere without telephones, and listen to you for a week, for a month, for two months."

Ivan Grigoryevich imagined sitting in a dacha armchair, sipping wine, and talking about people who had departed into eternal darkness. Many of their fates were piercingly sad; even the tenderest, quietest, kindest word about these people would have been like the touch of a rough, heavy hand on a heart that had been torn open. No, there were things that could not be spoken.

And, nodding his head, he said, "Yes, yes, yes, Tales of a Thousand and One Arctic Nights."

He was agitated. Which was the real Kolya? The young man in the worn sateen shirt, with a book in English under his arm, who had always been bright, quick-witted, and helpful? Or the man sitting opposite him—with the big soft cheeks and the waxen bald patch?

All his life Ivan had been strong. People had always turned to him for explanations, for reassurance. Even the "Indians"—the criminals in the disciplinary barrack —had sometimes asked his advice. Once he had even broken up a knife fight between the "thieves" and the "bitches." He had won the respect of people from many different backgrounds: "engineer saboteurs"; a ragged old man who had once been a Guards officer in the Tsar's army; a lieutenant colonel, a real master of the bow saw, who had served under Denikin in the Civil War; a gynecologist from Minsk who had been found guilty of Jewish bourgeois nationalism; a Crimean Tatar who used to complain about how his people had been driven from the shores of a warm sea to the Siberian *taiga* ; and a collective-farm worker who had nicked a sack of potatoes after calculating that, after he had served his time in the camp, the document attesting to his release would entitle him to a six-month city passport and so enable him to get away once and for all from his collective farm.

This day, however, Ivan Grigoryevich wanted someone's kind hands to lift from his shoulders the burden that he himself was carrying. And he knew that there is only one power in the world before which it is good and wonderful to feel that you yourself are small and weak. But Ivan Grigoryevich's mother had died long ago, and there was no power that could release him from this burden.

As for Nikolay Andreeyevich, he was now experiencing a strange feeling that had arisen entirely involuntarily.

While he had been waiting for Ivan, he had thought with intense feeling about how he would be supremely honest and sincere with him, as he had never been with anyone in his entire life. He had wanted to confess to Ivan all the sufferings of his conscience, to speak with humility of his own vile and bitter weakness.

Let Vanya pass judgment on him. If he could, Vanya would understand; if he could, he would forgive. And if Vanya could not understand and forgive, well then, so be it. He had felt moved; tears had clouded his eyes as he repeated to himself Nekrasov's famous lines:

> The son knelt down before the father;
> He washed the old man's feet.

He had wanted to say to his cousin, “Vanya, Vanechka, this sounds wild and crazy, but I envy you, I envy you because you did not have to sign vile letters in your terrible camp. You never voted for the execution of innocent men; you never made vile speeches...”

And suddenly, almost the moment he caught sight of Ivan, a totally opposite feeling had appeared inside him. The man in the padded jacket, in soldier’s boots, with a face eaten away by the cold and the *makhorka*-filled air of a crowded camp barrack—this man had seemed alien, unkind, hostile.

A similar feeling had arisen in him during his trips abroad. It had seemed unthinkable to speak to well-groomed foreigners about his doubts; it had been impossible for him to share with them the bitterness of his own sufferings.

He had spoken to foreigners not about his anxieties but only about what was central and indisputable—about the historic achievements of the Soviet State. He had defended his Motherland—and himself—against them.

Could he ever have imagined that Ivan would evoke in him a similar feeling? Why? How? But this was indeed what had happened.

He felt now that Ivan had come to him in order to strike a line through the whole of his life. Any moment now—and Ivan would humiliate him; he would talk down to him, he would treat him with condescension and arrogance.

And he desperately wanted to knock some sense into Ivan, to explain to him that everything had changed and begun anew, that all the old values had been deleted, that Ivan himself had been vanquished and broken, that it was not by chance that Ivan’s fate had turned out so bitter. Yes, yes, a gray-haired student—a loser...Who knows what he had been through? And what still lay ahead of him?

And it must have been just because Nikolay Andreyevich so passionately and obstinately wanted to say these things to Ivan that he ended up saying exactly the opposite:

“Who’d have believed everything could turn out so well? As regards what really matters, Vanya, you and I are equals. And I want to say one thing to you: if ever you have the feeling that you’ve lost whole decades and that your life has been wasted, if ever you feel like this when you meet people who have spent their lives writing books and suchlike rather than felling trees and digging the earth—don’t even give this feeling the time of day! In what really matters, Vanechka, you are the equal of all those who have moved science forward, the equal of all those who have succeeded in their life and work.”

And he felt his voice tremble with emotion and his heart ache with sweetness.

He saw Ivan’s embarrassment; he saw tears of agitation once again cloud his wife’s eyes.

He did, in truth, love Ivan. He loved him. He had loved him all of his life.

Listening to Nikolay Andreyevich trying to cheer up his unfortunate cousin, Maria Pavlovna felt that she had never before so fully sensed the strength of her husband’s soul. Yes, she herself had no doubt who was the conqueror and who was the conquered.

It really was very strange. Not even when a *ZIS* limousine had taken Nikolay to Vnukovo airport—to fly to India and introduce a delegation of Soviet scholars to Prime Minister Nehru—not even then had she sensed so intensely the extent of her triumph in life. A very particular sense of triumph, conjoined with tears for her dead son, with pity and with love for a man with gray hair and clumsy old boots.

“Vanya,” she said. “I’ve prepared a whole wardrobe for you—you and Kolya are the same height.”

This was clearly not the moment to be talking about old suits, and Nikolay Andreyevich said, “Heavens! Let’s not talk about trifles like that. All that goes without saying, Vanya! With all my heart!”

“Your heart doesn’t really come into it,” said Ivan Grigoryevich. “What matters more is that you’ve got three times more flesh on you than I have.”

Maria Pavlovna was taken aback by the degree of attentiveness and perhaps even concern in Ivan’s eyes. Her husband’s especially modest manner seemed only to be making it harder for Ivan to renounce his old condescending attitudes.

Ivan Grigoryevich downed some vodka; his face flushed, going not so much pink as dark brown.

He asked after old friends.

It was decades since Nikolay Andreyevich had last seen most of his cousin’s former friends; many were no longer alive. Everything that linked him to them—shared excitements, shared work—was now gone. Their ways had parted. His regret and sorrow for those who had disappeared forever “without right of correspondence”—even this regret and sorrow had now disappeared forever. Nikolay Andreyevich had no more wish to recall these people than one wishes to go close to a solitary, withered tree trunk with nothing around it but dead, dusty earth.

He wanted to speak about people whom Ivan Grigoryevich did not know. These were the people linked to the real events of his life. Talking about them, he would have been close to talking about what really mattered—close to talking about himself.

Yes, it was at moments like this that he needed to rid himself of that little worm, that sense of guilt that gnaws at every intellectual—that sense of the illegitimacy of all the wonderful things that had happened to him. What he wanted was not to repent but to assert.

And he began to talk of the people who had failed to value or understand him, who had benevolently despised him—and whom he was now doing everything within his power to help.

“Kolenka!” Maria Pavlovna interrupted suddenly. “Tell him about Anya Zamkovskaya.”

Husband and wife at once sensed Ivan Grigoryevich’s excitement.

“She wrote to you, didn’t she?” asked Nikolay Andreyevich.

“My last letter from her was eighteen years ago.”

“Yes, yes, she’s married. Her husband’s a physical chemist...his work has to do with those nuclear matters. They live in Leningrad—yes, in the same apartment where she used to live with her family. Usually we bump into her when we’re on holiday, in the autumn...At first she always used to ask after you, but after the war, to be honest, she stopped.”

Ivan Grigoryevich coughed and said in a hoarse voice, “I thought she must have died. She stopped writing.”

“Well, as I was saying about Mandelstam,” said Nikolay Andreyevich. “Remember old Zaozersky? Mandelstam was his favorite student. Zaozersky was destroyed in 1937. The man had traveled abroad a lot; he’d associated freely with émigrés and defectors, with people like Ipatyev and Chichibabin...And as for Mandelstam, well, he got off to a brilliant start, but I’ve told you what happened to him in the end, how he was branded a cosmopolitan, and so on and so forth...All that, to be honest with you, is nonsense, of course—but thanks to Zaozersky he really was hand in glove with all his European and American scientific contacts.”

For a moment Nikolay Andreyevich genuinely thought that he was saying all this not for his own sake but for Ivan’s sake. Ivan, after all, needed to be brought up-to-date: the beliefs he lived by were childish and no longer relevant. And then he found himself thinking, “God, how false I am! Falsity and hypocrisy have eaten right into my soul.”

He looked at Ivan’s brown, calm hands, and began to explain. “You probably don’t have a clear understanding of this new terminology: ‘cosmopolitanism,’ ‘bourgeois nationalism,’ ‘point five in the questionnaire.’ ‘Cosmopolitanism’ means more or less what ‘participation in a monarchist plot’ meant long ago, in the days of the First Congress of the Comintern. Although you must have come across all these people in the camps. Those who took the place of those who were removed—they too were removed. They too must have joined you there in the barracks. But I don’t think we need worry about all that any longer—the process of substitution has been completed. And now there has been a majestic yet simple change in our lives: the national is no longer confined to the realm of form—during these last decades it has taken over the realm of content. But many people are unable to understand this simplicity. After all, if you kick a man out of the house, he’s hardly likely to see it as a consequence of the laws of history; all he sees is an absurd mistake. But the fact remains: our scientists and engineers have created Russian Soviet planes, Russian uranium reactors, Russian electronic computing machines—and our sovereignty in these realms has to be accompanied by political sovereignty. Russianness has entered the realm of content; it has become the basis, the foundation.”

He went on to say how much he hated the Black Hundreds, the organizers of pogroms. And yet he could also see that Mandelstam and Khavkin—who were undoubtedly gifted, capable people—had gone blind. To them, everything that was happening had seemed to be simply an expression of Judophobia—and nothing else. Similarly, people like Pyzhov and Radionov had been unable to grasp that what really mattered was not Lysenko’s coarseness and intolerance; what mattered was the national, Russian science that he and his new men were affirming.

Ivan Grigoryevich’s eyes were watching him attentively. Deep inside him Nikolay Andreyevich began to feel the kind of anxiety you feel as a child when you notice a sad look in your mother’s eyes and you vaguely realize that you’re doing or saying something wrong, something bad. Wanting to quieten this confused feeling, he adopted a tone of heartfelt eloquence. “I’ve been though many tribulations,” he began eloquently. “I’ve lived through a difficult, stern epoch. It goes without saying that I did not ring out loud and clear, like Herzen’s Bell. I did not try to expose Beria, or the errors of Stalin. But it makes no sense even to try to imagine such things.”

Ivan Grigoryevich let his head droop—and it was impossible to tell whether he was dozing, daydreaming, or pondering Nikolay Andreyevich’s words. His hands were dozing; his head had sunk into his shoulders. Yesterday, listening to his traveling companions, he had sat in exactly the same way in the train.

Nikolay Andreyevich went on. “I had a hard time under Yagoda, and I had a hard time under Yezhov. But now that Beria and Abakumov and Ryumin and Merkulov and Kobulov are no longer, I’m well and truly back on my feet. The main thing is that I sleep peacefully—I no longer expect visitors in the night. And it is the same, of course, for others. And now, now one can’t help thinking that those cruel times did not pass in vain. A new life has been born, and we can all do our best to participate in it.”

“Kolya, Kolya,” Ivan Grigoryevich said quietly.

This angered Maria Pavlovna, who had noticed the look of bleak compassion on their guest’s face.

Turning to her husband—who had also noticed this look—she said, “Why are you too timid to say that Mandelstam and Pyzhov are infatuated with their own selves? Why keep lamenting that life has put them in their place? It certainly has—and thank God!”

This reproach, of course, was really aimed at their guest. Worried that she might have spoken too sharply, she continued, “I’ll go and get the bed ready. Vanya’s probably tired—more than we realize.”

But Ivan Grigoryevich—already fully aware that this meeting, far from bringing him relief, was merely adding to his burden—asked his cousin in a sullen tone, “And you? Did *you* sign the letter condemning the Killer Doctors? I heard about that letter in the camps—from those who learned that your ‘process of

substitution' was not over yet..."

"What a dear, sweet eccentric you are!" said Nikolay Andreyevich—and faltered, and fell silent.

Deep inside him everything had gone cold with anguish, and at the same time he could feel that he had broken out in a sweat, that he had gone red, that his cheeks were burning.

But he didn't fall on his knees. He said, "My friend, my dear friend, it's not only in the camps that people had hard lives. Our lives have been hard too."

"I'm not judging you!" Ivan Grigoryevich said hurriedly. "I'm not judging you—or anyone else. Heaven forbid! No, no...How could I? Anything but..."

"No, no, that's not what I mean," said Nikolay Andreyevich. "What I'm trying to say is how important it is, in the midst of dust and smoke, in the midst of terrible contradictions, not to be blind—how important it is to keep seeing, to keep seeing the vastness of the road. If you go blind, after all, you can go mad."

Ivan Grigoryevich said apologetically, "The trouble is, it seems, that I don't know what's what, that I mistake vision for blindness."

"So where are we going to put Vanya?" asked Maria Pavlovna. "Where's he going to be most comfortable?"

"No, no thank you," said Ivan Grigoryevich. "I won't be able to spend the night with you."

"Why not? Where else are you going to go? Come on, Masha, we'll have to tie him up."

"No, no," said Ivan Grigoryevich. "Not that."

Nikolay Andreyevich fell silent and frowned.

"Forgive me, I just can't, but it's not...it's something quite different."

"Listen, Vanya..." said Nikolay Andreyevich, and then said nothing.

After Ivan Grigoryevich had left, Maria Pavlovna looked at the table, still covered with dishes, and at the chairs that had been pushed back from the table.

"We gave him a royal welcome," she said. "As good as we gave the president of the Academy of Sciences and his wife."

Mean, stingy people, on occasion, outdo generous, expansive people in the scale of their generosity. Maria Pavlovna had indeed prepared a lavish meal.

Nikolay Andreyevich went up to the table. "Yes," he said, "if a man's mad, then he stays mad forever."

She placed her palms on his temples and, kissing him on the forehead, said, "Don't let it upset you. You really mustn't, my incorrigible idealist!"

5

Ivan Grigoryevich awoke at dawn, lying on the boards of a “hard-class” railway carriage. He listened to the noise of the wheels. Then he half opened his eyes and stared out into the gray dawn light beyond the window.

During his twenty-nine years as a prisoner, he had dreamed several times of his childhood. Once he had dreamed of a small bay. The water was calm, the bottom was covered with pebbles, and some little crabs had hurried past, moving sideways and silently in their underwater way, and disappeared into the seaweed. He had walked slowly over the rounded stones, feeling the gentle touch of the sea grass on his feet, and then dozens of elongated drops of quicksilver—baby scad and mackerel—had spurted up out of the water and scattered. The sun had lit up the green underwater meadows and clumps of spruce—and this beloved little bay had seemed to be filled not with salty water but with salty light.

He had dreamed this dream in a freight wagon. That had been twenty-five years ago, but he still remembered the despair that had gripped him when he saw the gray wintry light and the gray faces of the other prisoners, when he heard the creak of boots in the snow outside, the resonant knocking of the guards’ hammers as they checked the bottom of the carriage.

Sometimes he saw a house overlooking the sea, the branches of an old cherry tree bending over the roof, a well...

He had developed his memory to a painful degree of sharpness, and he could remember the gleam of a thick magnolia leaf, the flat stone in the middle of the stream. He remembered the design of the tablecloth—and the quiet cool of rooms with white, limewashed walls. He remembered reading, on the couch with his legs drawn up—on a hot summer day the oilcloth was pleasantly cool. Sometimes he tried to remember the face of his mother, and his heart would ache, and he would screw up his face, and there would be tears in his tightly closed eyes—just as in childhood, when you try to look at the sun.

He could remember the mountains easily, and in full detail; it was as if he were leafing through a familiar book, one that falls open of itself at the right page.

Scrambling through brambles and twisted elms, slipping on the stony, cracked, yellowy-gray earth, he would make his way to the pass and, after looking back at the sea, enter the cool half dark of the forest...With their stout branches, the powerful oaks effortlessly raised up to the very sky their hills of intricate foliage; all about, a solemn silence reigned.

In the middle of the previous century, the coastal areas had been inhabited by Circassians.

The old Greek, the father of Methodius the gardener, had as a boy seen Circassian gardens and orchards, Circassian villages full of people.

After the Russian conquest of this part of the Black Sea coast, the Circassians had disappeared and life had died out in the coastal mountains. Here and there among the oaks were hunched-up plums, pears, and cherries, now growing wild again, but there were no longer any peaches or apricots—their brief span was over.

Here in the forest lay sullen, soot-blackened stones that were the remains of ruined hearths; in abandoned cemeteries were dark headstones that had already half sunk into the ground.

Everything inanimate—stones, iron—was being swallowed by the earth, dissolving into it with the years, while green, vegetable life, in contrast, was bursting up from the earth. The boy found the silence over the cold hearths especially painful. And when he came back home, the smell of smoke from the kitchen, the barking of dogs, and the cackling of hens somehow seemed all the sweeter.

Once he went up to his mother, who was sitting at the table with a book, and hugged her, pressing his head against her knees.

“Are you ill?” she asked.

“No, I’m well, I’m just so happy,” he muttered, kissing his mother’s dress and her hands, and then he burst into tears.

He was quite unable to explain to his mother what it was that he felt. It was as if, there in the half dark of the forest, someone were lamenting, searching for people who had vanished, looking behind trees, listening for the voices of Circassian shepherds or the crying of babies, sniffing the air, hoping to sense the smell of smoke, of hot flatbreads.

And so, when he came back from the forest to the beauty and charm of his own home, he felt not only joy but also shame...

His mother had seemed unable to make any sense at all of his explanations. She had replied, “My poor silly boy, you’ll find life a struggle if you’re going to be so sensitive and easily wounded.”

During supper, his father exchanged looks with his mother and said, “Vanya, you probably know that our Sochi was once called Post Dakhovsky and that the villages here in the mountains once had names like First Regiment and Second Regi-ment.”

“Yes, I know,” said Ivan, and sniffed sullenly.

“They were the bases of Russian military units. And these troops did not only carry rifles—they also carried axes and spades. They cut roads through forests inhabited by cruel, wild mountain people.”

The father scratched his beard and added, “Excuse these grand words—but they were cutting a road for Russia. That’s how we’ve ended up here...I’ve helped set up schools, and Yakov Yakovlevich, among others, has planted orchards and vineyards, and still other people have built roads and hospitals. Progress demands sacrifices, and it’s no use weeping over what’s inevitable. You understand what I’m trying to say?”

“Yes,” said Ivan, “but there were orchards here before us—and they’ve been left to go wild.”

“Yes, my friend,” said the father. “When you chop down a forest, splinters fly. But we didn’t, by the way, force the Circassians to leave. They themselves chose to go to Turkey. They could have stayed here and become a part of Russian culture. As it is, they suffered great poverty in Turkey, and many of them died...”

In the camp, Ivan had remembered many things from his past. He had dreamed of his birthplace. He had heard familiar voices. Their old watchdog, with rheumy, red-rimmed eyes, had got up to meet him.

And he had awoken to the ocean-like roar of the *taiga*, to the rage of a winter blizzard.

And now he was free—and he was still waiting for something good, something from his youth, to come back to him.

That morning he had woken in the train to a sense of irredeemable loneliness. The evening with his cousin had filled him with bitterness, and Moscow had seemed crushing and deafening. The vast tall buildings, the heavy traffic, the traffic lights, the crowds walking along the sidewalks—everything had seemed strange and alien. The whole city had seemed like a single great mechanism, schooled to freeze on the red light and to start moving again on the green...During the thousand years of her history Russia had seen many great things. During the Soviet period the country had seen global military victories, vast construction sites, whole new cities, dams across the Dnieper and the Volga, canals joining different seas. The country had seen mighty tractors and skyscrapers...There was only one thing Russia had not seen during this thousand years: freedom.

He had gone by trolleybus to the southwestern part of the city. There, amid country mud, amid village ponds that had only partly dried up, huge eight- and ten-story apartment blocks had appeared. Village huts, small sheds, and vegetable patches were living out their last days, squeezed from all sides by this vast offensive on the part of stone and asphalt.

In the chaos, amid the roar of five-ton trucks, could be glimpsed the future streets of a new Moscow. Ivan Grigoryevich had wandered through this city that was coming into being, where there were still no roadways and sidewalks, where people walked to their homes along paths that wound between heaps of rubble. Again and again he saw the same signs: MEAT and HAIRDRESSER. In the twilight the vertical MEAT signs shone red; the horizontal HAIRDRESSER signs were a piercing green.

These signs, which had appeared along with the first residents, seemed to reveal man’s carnivorous essence.

Meat, meat, meat...Human beings devoured meat. They could not do without it. There were still no libraries, no theaters, no cinemas, no tailors. There were not even hospitals, pharmacies, or schools, but at once, amid the stone, a red light had begun to shine: MEAT, MEAT, MEAT.

And immediately after this—the emerald of the HAIRDRESSER signs. Man eats meat, and he grows fur.

Ivan Grigoryevich had gone to the station during the night and found that the last train for Leningrad left at two. He had bought a ticket and taken his things from the left-luggage office.

He had been surprised by his sense of peace on finding himself in a cold, empty coach.

The train had passed through the outskirts of Moscow. Dark autumn copses and glades had slipped by. It was good to be escaping from the vastness of Moscow—from its stone and cars and electricity; it was a relief not to have to listen any longer to his cousin’s story about how the rational progress of history had cleared the ground for his own success.

On the shiny board, as if on water, gleamed a flashlight.

“Grandad, have you got your ticket?” a conductress asked.

“Yes, I’ve already shown it.”

For many years he had imagined the hour of returning from the camps and meeting his cousin, the only person in the world who had known him as a child, who had known his mother and father. But his sense of calm and relief on getting into the night train was not really so very surprising.

His sense of loneliness when he awoke was so total that it seemed to him more than any creature on earth, any air-breathing creature, could survive.

He was on his way to the city where he had spent his student years, the city where his love still lived.

When she had stopped writing to him many years ago, he had mourned for her. He had not doubted that only death could have broken off their correspondence. But she was still living. She was alive...

Ivan grigoryevich spent three days in Leningrad. He went twice to the university; he went to the Okhta district and to the Polytechnical Institute. He searched for the streets where his friends and acquaintances had lived. Some streets and buildings had been destroyed during the Siege. Sometimes the streets and buildings were still there—but the boards in the main entrances bore no names he recognized.

There were times, as he walked through all these familiar places, when he felt calm and abstracted, still surrounded by prison faces and the sound of camp conversations; and there were other times when he would stand before a building he knew, on a crossroads he knew, and some memory from his youth would pierce right through him.

He visited the Hermitage—to find that it left him cold and bored. How could all those paintings have remained as beautiful as ever while he was being transformed into an old man, an old man from the camps? Why had they not changed? Why had the faces of the marvelous Madonnas not aged? How come their eyes had not been blinded by tears? Maybe their immutability—their eternity—was not a strength but a weakness? Perhaps this was how art betrays the human beings that have engendered it?

There was one occasion when the power of a sudden memory felt especially poignant—though the incident he remembered seemed random and insignificant. Once he had helped an elderly woman with a limp, carrying her basket up to the third floor for her. Afterward, running down the dark staircase, he had suddenly gasped with happiness: puddles instead of ice, March sun, spring! He went up to the building where Anya Zamkovskaya had lived. It had seemed unimaginable that he might look again at the high windows and the granite facing of the walls, at the marble steps shining white in the half dark, at the metal grille around the lift. How many, many times he had remembered this building. He had walked Anya home in the evenings; he had stood outside and waited until the light went on in her room. She had said, “Even if you fight in a war and come back blind, legless, and armless, I shall be happy in my love.”

In a half-open window Ivan Grigoryevich could see flowers. He stood for a while by the main entrance, then went on his way. His heart had not missed a beat. While he was still behind the barbed wire of the camps, this woman he had thought dead had been closer to his heart than she was today, closer than when he was standing beneath her window.

He both recognized and did not recognize the city. Many things seemed unchanged, as if Ivan Grigoryevich had last seen them only a few hours ago. Many buildings and streets had been reborn—entirely rebuilt. And much had disappeared completely, with nothing to take its place.

But Ivan Grigoryevich did not understand that it was not only the city that had changed. He too had changed. His concerns had changed; his eyes now looked for other things.

What he saw now was not what he had seen before; it was as if he had moved from one storey of life to another. Now he saw flea markets, police stations, passport registration offices, cheap canteens, employment bureaus, job announcement boards, hospitals, rooms in railway stations where transit passengers could pass the night...As for what he had known before—theater posters and concert halls, secondhand bookshops, sports stadiums and university lecture halls, libraries and exhibitions—that whole world had now disappeared; it had slipped away into some fourth dimension.

In the same way, for a chronic invalid nothing exists in a city except pharmacies and hospitals, clinics and medical commissions pronouncing on categories of disability. For a drunk, a city is built from half-liter bottles of vodka to be shared with two chance companions. And for someone in love, a city consists of benches on boulevards, of two-kopek pieces for public telephones, of the hands of city clocks pointing toward the time of a rendezvous.

Once these streets had been full of familiar faces; in the evenings he had seen lights in the windows of his friends’ rooms. But the familiar eyes smiling at him now were those of other prisoners, smiling at him from the bedboards of camp barracks. It was their pale lips that were whispering, “Hello there, Ivan Grigoryevich!”

Here in this city he had once known the faces of assistants in bookshops and food stores, the faces of men selling newspapers from kiosks, the faces of women selling cigarettes. And in the camp at Vorkuta, a supervisor had once come up to him and said, “I know you—you were in the transit camp at Omsk!”

But today there was no one he recognized among these vast crowds, nor did he strike up any new acquaintances.

People’s faces had changed a great deal. Visible and invisible ties had been broken—broken by time, by the mass deportations after the assassination of Kirov, by the snows and dust of Kazakhstan, by the devastating years of the Siege. Ivan Grigoryevich was alone; he was a stranger.

Millions of people had moved and been moved. The streets of Leningrad were now filled by blue-eyed, high-cheekboned people from the nearby towns and villages—and in the camps Ivan Grigoryevich had met all too many melancholy figures whose inability to pronounce the letter *r* showed them to be natives of the old Saint Petersburg.

The Nevsky Prospekt and the backwoods had moved toward each other. They had mingled not only in buses and apartments but also on the pages of books and journals, in the conference rooms of scientific institutes.

Whether he was at a sign saying PASSPORT SECTION, peering through the windows of a Leningrad police station, or listening to his cousin hold forth as they sat at a lavishly spread table—wherever he was, Ivan Grigoryevich had sensed the spirit of the camp. Barbed wire, it seemed, was no longer necessary; life outside the barbed wire had become, in its essence, no different from that of the barracks.

Wreathed in flame, smoke, and steam, a vast cauldron was bubbling, groaning, and gurgling—and there were many people who imagined that they alone understood what was going on in its chaos. Many imagined that they alone knew how the stew had been cooked and who would be eating it.

In his soldier's boots, Ivan Grigoryevich was once again standing before the divinely barefoot, laurel-crowned horseman. He had used to pass this way thirty years ago; then too the bronze Tsar had been full of might. In Peter the Great he had, at last, met a familiar figure.

Never, neither thirty years ago nor one hundred thirty years ago, when Pushkin had brought his humble protagonist to this square, had the wondrous Tsar seemed as great as he did today. No power in the world was vaster than the power he had gathered to himself and to which he had given expression—the majestic power of a wondrous State. This power had grown and grown. It now reigned over fields and factories, over the writing desks of poets and scholars, over sites where new canals and dams were being built, over quarries, sawmills, and timber forests; it was able, in its great might, to control both the vastness of space and the secret depth of the hearts of enchanted human beings who willingly offered up to it the gift of their freedom, even of their wish for freedom.

" *Sankt Peterburg, sanpropusnik, Sankt Peterburg, sanpropusnik*," Ivan Grigoryevich began repeating to himself. This silly jingle, linking the old capital's old name with the camp reception barracks where newly arrived prisoners were strip-searched, shaved, washed, disinfected, and deloused, seemed somehow to express a link, a bond between the great horseman and the camp vagabond.

Ivan Grigoryevich spent his nights at the railway station, in the room for passengers in transit. He was spending only one and a half or two rubles a day, and he was in no hurry to leave Leningrad.

On the third day he bumped into someone he knew, someone he had remembered many times during his years in the camps.

They recognized each other straightaway—even though Ivan Grigoryevich now bore no resemblance to the third-year student he had once been, even though Vitaly Antonovich Pinegin, now wearing a gray raincoat and a felt hat, also looked very different from the young man of thirty years ago who had gone about in a worn student jacket.

Seeing the stunned look on Pinegin's face, Ivan Grigoryevich said, "What is it? Did you think I was dead?"

Pinegin spread his hands in bewilderment. "Well, someone did tell me ten years ago that you had, you know..."

His alert, intelligent eyes were looking deep into the eyes of Ivan Grigoryevich.

"Don't worry," said Ivan Grigoryevich. "I'm not a ghost, nor, which would be far more unpleasant, am I a fugitive. Like you, I have a passport and everything else."

This made Pinegin indignant. "When I meet an old comrade," he said, "it's not his passport that interests me."

Pinegin had risen a long way in the world but he was still a good fellow, not someone to stand on ceremony.

Not for a moment, whether he was talking about his sons, or whether he was saying, "You've changed a great deal, but I recognized you at once," did Pinegin take his eyes off Ivan Grigoryevich; his eyes were greedy, fascinated.

"So then," said Pinegin. "There you are. What else should I tell you about?"

" *What you should really tell me...*" For a moment, Pinegin froze—but no, Ivan Grigoryevich had not really said anything of the kind.

"But you haven't told me anything about yourself," said Pinegin. Once again he waited. Would Ivan Grigoryevich say, " *I don't need to—you know more than enough already. Yes, you had more than enough to say about me when there were people wanting to know.* "

But Ivan Grigoryevich said nothing. He just shrugged his shoulders.

And Pinegin suddenly realized: Vanya knew nothing, and it was impossible for him to know anything. It was all just nerves, his poor nerves...Why hadn't he chosen some other day to send his car in for service? He'd been thinking about Ivan not long ago. One of his relatives, he had thought, might get him posthumously rehabilitated. Ivan would be transferred from the category of dead souls to that of living souls. And now here the man was, in broad daylight—Ivan, Vanya, Vanechka! He had done thirty years in the camps, and in his pocket, probably, was a document with the words, "Due to lack of evidence."

He looked again into Ivan Grigoryevich's eyes and understood, once and for all, that Ivan knew nothing. He began to feel ashamed of his heart tremors, of his cold sweat, of how close he'd been to gibbering out something stupid.

And his certainty that Ivan would not spit in his face, would not hold him to account—this new certainty filled Pinegin with light. With a kind of gratitude that even he himself could barely understand, he said to Ivan, "Listen, Ivan. Let's just be straightforward, like true workers. My old man, after all, was a blacksmith. Maybe you need money? Please, believe me, as a friend, with all my heart."

Without a word of reproach, Ivan Grigoryevich looked with alert, sad curiosity into Pinegin's eyes. And just for one second—but not for two—Pinegin felt that he could sacrifice everything. He could sacrifice his decorations and honors, his dacha, his position of power and authority, his beautiful wife, his brilliant sons now studying nuclear physics—anything not to sense the look of those eyes on him.

"Well, Pinegin, all the best!" said Ivan. And he walked off toward the railway station.

Who is guilty? Who will be held responsible?

This question needs thought. We must not answer too quickly.

Here they all are: expert reports from lying engineers and literary critics; speeches denouncing enemies of the people; intimate conversations and confessions made to a friend—transformed into the reports and denunciations of informers and stoolies.

These denunciations were the prelude to an arrest; they were at hand throughout the investigation; they largely determined the verdict. These megatons of denunciatory falsehood served, it seems, to establish the lists of who was to be classified as a kulak , who was to be deprived of their passport and the right to vote, who was to be deported, who was to be shot.

At one end of the chain were two people at a table, drinking cups of tea and chatting. Next, in cozy lamplight, someone cultured and educated composed a report; or perhaps an activist gave a frank and straightforward speech at a meeting of the collective farm. And at the other end of the chain were crazed eyes; damaged kidneys; a skull pierced by a bullet; gangrenous, pus-oozing toes that had been bitten by the frost of the *taiga* ; scurvy-ridden corpses in a log hut that served as the camp morgue.

In the beginning was the word...That is truly so.

So what is to be done with these informer-murderers?

Here is one who has been released after twelve years in the camps. He has shaking hands and the sunken eyes of a martyr. We'll call him Judas I. It has been rumored that, long ago, he behaved badly under interrogation. Some of his friends refuse to greet him if they pass him on the street. Those who are a little more intelligent are polite to him when they meet, but they do not invite him back home. Those who are still more intelligent—and more generous and understanding—invite him into their homes but are careful not to let him into their hearts.

All of these friends have dachas, savings accounts, medals and decorations, cars. He, of course, is thin, and they are plump—but they did nothing bad under interrogation. Or rather, they were not in a position to do anything bad—they were not interrogated. They were lucky; they had never been arrested. In what way are these plump men morally superior to this thin man? He too could have been plump; they too could have been thin. Was their fate determined by some law, or by chance?

He was someone quite ordinary. He drank tea, ate fried eggs, visited the Moscow Arts Theater, liked to talk to his friends about books he had read. Sometimes he was kind and generous. He was, admittedly, nervous, high-strung; he had no confidence in himself.

And they put the heat on him. They did not merely shout at him; they beat him; they made him eat salted herrings while giving him nothing to drink; and they threatened him with execution. But still, what he did was a terrible thing: he slandered an innocent man. Admittedly, the man he slandered was never arrested—while he himself, forced into being a slanderer, did twelve years of forced labor and came back barely alive, a broken man, a pauper, on his last legs. But the fact remains: he committed slander.

Let us not judge hastily. Let us give serious thought to this case.

And now, here is Judas II. This man never spent so much as a day in prison. He had a reputation for being clever and eloquent—and then people came back from the camps, more dead than alive, and said that he had been a regular informer for the security organs. He had helped to destroy many people. For many years he had conducted heart-to-heart conversations with his friends and then handed in written reports to the authorities. His testimonies were not extorted from him by torture; on the contrary, he himself took the initiative, deftly and inventively leading his friends to speak about dangerous matters. Two of the men he slandered never returned from the camps; one was sentenced by a military tribunal and shot. The survivors returned with lists of illnesses, each of which on its own—even by the commission's demanding standards—would entitle a man to full invalidity benefit for the rest of his life.

In the meantime he had acquired a paunch—and a reputation as a gourmet and a connoisseur of Georgian wines. And he understood about culture: he was a collector, among other things, of rare editions of old poetry.

But let us not hurry. Let us think before we pronounce judgment.

Ever since childhood he had been frightened out of his mind. In 1919 his wealthy father had died of typhus, in a concentration camp. His aunt was married to a general, and the two of them had emigrated to Paris. His elder brother had fought for the Whites. He had lived in terror; terror had lived inside him. His mother had trembled when she spoke to a policeman, when she spoke to the building manager—or to the senior tenant in their communal apartment, or to officials from the city soviet. Every hour of every day he and his family had sensed their class inferiority, their class depravity. At school he himself had trembled before the secretary of the Party cell; sweet, pretty Galya, the leader of the school's Young Pioneers, had always seemed to look on him with revulsion, as if he were an untouchable, a worm. He was terrified that she might notice the adoring look in his eyes.

And at this point one begins to understand. This man had been hypnotized, enchanted by the might of the new world. He was like a little bird, unable to look away, captivated by the dazzling gaze of something new,

brilliant, and all-embracing. He so much wanted to become a part of it all, to be favored. And the new world had taken him in. The poor little sparrow had not so much as let out a cheep, had not so much as fluttered his wings when the dread new world had said it needed his mind and his charm. He had offered his all on the altar of the Fatherland.

All this, of course, is true. Nevertheless—what a bastard! While he was denouncing others, he did not forget to look out for himself. He ate delicacies; he basked in the sun. And yet...he was terribly defenseless—the kind of man who really shouldn't be let out anywhere without a nanny, without a loving wife to look after him. How can a man like him be expected to cope with a force that had conquered half the world, a force that had turned an entire empire inside out and upside down? This man, remember, was all trembling and delicate; he was like fine lace. You had only to touch him in some wrong way—and he would seem lost and confused, his eyes full of misery.

And this deadly swamp viper had insinuated itself into the confidence of many people—and brought them great suffering.

And the people he destroyed were people like himself—kind, reserved, intelligent, timid people, his own oldest friends. He alone had the key to them; he was, after all, a man of real understanding, a man who had wept many times over Chekhov's story "The Bishop."

All the same, let's wait, let's think. Let's not condemn him without thinking.

And here is a new comrade: Judas III. He has a hoarse, clipped voice—the voice of a boatswain. His gaze is calm and searching. He has the assurance of a master of life. One moment he may be entrusted with ideological work, another moment with the management of agriculture. His answers on official forms, his answers to questions about his past and his social background, are impeccable, white as snow; they gleam with their own light. His relatives are all machine-tool operators or the poorest of poor peasants.

In 1937 he wrote more than two hundred denunciations at one go, without a second thought. The list of his victims is varied: commissars from the time of the Civil War; a poet and songwriter; the director of a foundry; two district Party committee secretaries; an old engineer (not a Party member); one newspaper editor and two publishing-house editors; the director of a special "closed" canteen; a philosophy teacher; the director of a "political enlightenment office"; a botany professor; a handyman employed by the superintendents of a block of apartments; two officials from a district agricultural administration office...It is impossible to list all of them.

All his denunciations were directed not against "former" people but against people who were truly Soviet; his victims were Party members, men who had fought in the Civil War, activists. He specialized in the more fanatical Party members, gleefully slashing them in the face with his deadly, razor-sharp words.

Few of these two hundred returned. Some were sentenced and executed and shot; others put on "wooden jackets" after dying of malnutrition or being shot in the course of camp purges. Some returned, physically and emotionally mutilated, to drag out their free existence as best they could.

For him 1937 was a time of victory. This sharp-eyed young lad had been poorly educated and everyone around him seemed superior to him, both as regards their general level of knowledge and as regards their heroic past. How could he ever compete with those who had initiated and carried out the Revolution? And yet—the mere touch of his hand was enough to bring down dozens of men covered in revolutionary glory.

From 1937 onward his ascent was vertiginous. He turned out to be imbued with grace, with the most precious essence of everything most new and necessary.

With him, at least, everything seems to be cut-and-dried. It was by walking over other men's bones that this man became a deputy and a member of a Party committee.

But no, no. One should not be in too much of a hurry. One needs to think carefully, to understand everything before pronouncing judgment. For he too did not know—he knew not what he was doing.

Speaking in the name of the Party, his mentors once said to him, "We're in trouble. We are surrounded by enemies. These men pretend to be tried-and-tested Party members, members of the prerevolutionary underground, men who fought in the Civil War—but they are enemies of the people, secret agents, provocateurs..." The Party had said to him, "You are young and pure. I trust you, my son. Help me—otherwise I shall perish. Help me to conquer the forces of evil."

Stamping its Stalinist boots, the Party had shouted at him, "If you show the least indecision, you will prove that you are no different from these degenerates—and I will grind you to dust. Remember, you son of a bitch, that hut with no chimney, that black hut where you were born! It is I, the Party, who am leading you toward the light. Revere loyalty and obedience! It is the great Stalin, your father, who gives you the order: 'Tally-ho! Hunt them down!'"

No, no, he was not settling personal scores.

A Komsomol member from the country, he did not believe in God. The faith that lived in him was another faith: faith in the mercilessness of the chastising hand of the great Stalin. In him lived the unhesitating obedience of the believer. In him lived a blissful timidity before a powerful force, before this force's great guides and leaders: Marx, Engels, Lenin, and Stalin. A foot soldier of the great Stalin, he acted on Stalin's orders.

Naturally, he did also feel a biological hostility, an instinctive secret loathing for the generation of intellectual and fanatical revolutionaries it was his role to hunt down.

He was carrying out his duty, he was not settling scores—but it was also out of an instinct for self-preservation that he wrote his denunciations. He was acquiring a substance more precious than gold or land: the trust of the Party. He understood that in Soviet life the trust of the Party was everything: power, honor, authority. And he believed that his lies served a higher truth: in his denunciations he could glimpse this Truth.

But can he be blamed when even better men than he were unable to make out what was a lie and what was the truth, when even pure hearts were powerless before the question: What was good and what was evil?

He believed, or rather, he wanted to believe—or rather, he couldn't not believe.

In some ways he disliked his dark work—except that it was his duty! And then again, in other ways his terrible work was attractive, seductive, intoxicating. "Remember," his mentors used to tell him, "that you have neither father nor mother, neither brothers nor sisters. You have only the Party."

It was a strange, troubling feeling: thoughtless obedience, far from rendering him powerless, endowed him with a terrible power.

In his curt, imperious voice, in his cruel eyes—the eyes of a military commander—you could sometimes sense a very different nature that lay hidden inside him: a crazed, stupefied way of being that had been nourished by centuries of Russian slavery, of Asiatic despotism...

But here too we must stop and think. It is a terrible thing to condemn even a terrible man.

And here we have a new comrade: Judas IV.

He lives in communal apartments; he is a minor to middling official; he is a collective-farm activist. But whoever he may be, his face is always the same. Whether he is old or young, whether he is ugly or a ruddy-faced giant of a Russian warrior, it is always easy to recognize him. He is a philistine, always greedy to acquire, fanatically devoted to his own material interests. His fanaticism—a fanaticism he displays in regard to the acquisition of a sofa bed, a bag of buckwheat, a Polish sideboard, imported textiles, or construction materials that are in short supply—is equal in its intensity to the fanaticism of a Giordano Bruno or Andrey Zhelyabov.

He is the creator of a categorical imperative opposite to Kant's; for him, a man, and mankind as a whole, are simply means to be employed in the course of his never-ending hunt for objects. There is always a tense, hurt, irritated look in his eyes, whatever their color. Someone has always just stepped on his toes; there is invariably someone he has to settle accounts with.

For him the State's passion for unmasking enemies of the people is a blessing. It is like a steady trade wind blowing over the ocean, a gracious following wind filling his small yellow sail. And at the price of the suffering of those he destroys, he gets what he needs: additional living space, a salary increase, a neighbor's hut, a suite of Polish furniture, a little garden, a heated garage for his *Moskvich* car...

He despises books, music, the beauty of nature, love, and maternal tenderness. He wants objects, only objects.

But even he is not moved exclusively by material considerations. He is extremely touchy; his grievances fester inside him.

He will denounce a colleague who has made him jealous by dancing with his wife, a wit who has made fun of him during a meal, even just someone from the communal apartment who has accidentally knocked into him in the kitchen.

He has two distinguishing features. First, he is a volunteer. No one frightened him into it; he writes denunciations of his own accord. Second, what he sees in a denunciation is the direct, definite material benefit that he can derive from it.

Nevertheless, let us restrain the fist that has been raised to strike him: his passion for objects is a passion born of poverty. Yes, he could tell you about a room eight meters square that is home to eleven people, where a paralyzed man is snoring while a young couple rustles and moans beside him, where an old woman is muttering a prayer and a child who has wet himself keeps crying and crying. He could tell you about greenish-brown village bread made with ground-up leaves, and about a staple Moscow soup, made from frozen potatoes that were being sold off cheap, that he used to have three times a day.

He could tell you about a house without a single beautiful object; about chairs with plywood seats; about tumblers made of thick, murky glass; about tin spoons and two-pronged forks; about underwear that has been mended many times over; about a dirty rubber raincoat that he had worn, in December, over a torn quilted jacket.

He could tell you about waiting for a bus on a dark winter morning, about the unimaginable crush in the tram after a night spent in a desperately cramped room.

It was, surely, living an animal life that had first engendered his animal passion for things, his longing for a more spacious den. The bestiality of his life had turned him into a beast.

Yes, yes, of course. But it is clear that he lived no worse than others. It is clear, in fact, that he lived better than many.

And these many, many others did not do what he did. Let us take our time; let us think—and only then pronounce judgment.

Prosecutor: Do you all confirm that you wrote denunciations against Soviet citizens?

Informers: Yes, in a way.

Prosecutor: Do you admit that you are guilty of the deaths of innocent Soviet people?

Informers: No, we categorically deny it. The State had already doomed these people. Our work was, one might say, cosmetic. It served to keep up appearances. Essentially, whatever we wrote and however we wrote it, whether we accused or defended them, these people were already doomed.

Prosecutor: But sometimes you wrote denunciations out of your own free will. In such cases, you yourselves chose the victim.

Informers: Our freedom of choice was only apparent. People were destroyed according to statistical methods. Those who belonged to particular social and ideological strata were scheduled for extermination. We were well aware of those parameters—and so were you. We never informed against members of social strata that were healthy and not already marked for destruction.

Prosecutor: Or in the words of the new gospel: "Push that which is falling!" Nevertheless, there were occasions, even during the harshest of times, when the State acquitted those you had slandered.

Defense Counsel: Yes, there were indeed such occasions—because of mistakes. But only God makes no mistakes. And the fact that there were very few acquittals—as you well know—indicates that there were very few mistakes.

Prosecutor: Yes, you informers knew what you were doing. But please answer me: Why did you inform?

Informers (in unison): They forced me to, they beat me...I was hypnotized by terror, by the power of boundless violence...As for me I was carrying out my duty as a Party member, to the best of my understanding at the time.

Prosecutor: And you, comrade Number Four, why aren't *you* saying anything?

Judas IV: Me? Why are you picking on me? I know, it's because I'm uneducated. Because it's easier for you to get the better of someone uneducated, someone not so intelligent!

Defense Counsel (interrupting): Please allow me to make a clarification. My client really did write denunciations in pursuit of personal ends. But please bear in mind that his personal interests in no way contradicted those of the State. The State did not reject my client's denunciations. From this it can be deduced that he performed a service that was of use to the State, even though it may appear at first glance that he was impelled only by personal and egotistic considerations. And now—something more important still. In Stalin's day you yourself, comrade Prosecutor, would have been accused of underestimating the role of the State. Do you not understand that the force fields generated by our State, its heavy, multitrillion-ton mass, the super-terror and super-submissiveness that it evokes in a speck of human dust are such as to render meaningless any accusations directed against a weak, defenseless, individual human being? It's absurd to blame a particle of fluff for falling onto the earth.

Prosecutor: Your own position is clear. You are reluctant to allow your clients to accept even the least share of guilt. Only the State, only the State is to blame. But what about you informers? What do you all think? Do you really not consider yourselves in the least to blame?

Informers (They exchange looks and whispers. A learned informer takes the floor): Allow me to reply. For all its apparent simplicity, your question is, in fact, far from simple. In the first place, it is pointless. What use is it now to attempt to find out who is guilty with regard to crimes committed in the era of Stalin? That would be like emigrating to the Moon and then starting a lawsuit about title deeds to a plot of land here on Earth. On the other hand, if we are to take the line that the two eras are not so distant from each other and that, *sub specie aeternitatis*, they stand "almost side by side"—as the poet said—then many other complexities arise. Why are you so eager to condemn those, like us, who are small and weak? Why not begin with the State? Why not try the State? *Our* sin, after all, is *its* sin. Pass judgment on the State then—fearlessly, out loud, and in public. You have no choice but to be fearless—you claim, after all, to be speaking in the name of truth. Come on then, get on with it!

And please also explain one other thing. Why have you waited till now to raise these questions? You've known us all long enough. In Stalin's lifetime you were only too glad to spend time with us. You used to wait outside our offices for us to receive you. Sometimes you used to whisper about us in thin, sparrowlike voices. We too used to whisper like sparrows. Yes, like us, you participated in the Stalin era. Why must we, who were participants, be judged by you, who were also participants? Why must *you* determine *our* guilt? Do you not see where the difficulty lies? Maybe we really are guilty, but there is no judge who has the moral right to discuss the question of our guilt. Remember how Leo Tolstoy said that no one in the world is guilty? But in our State things are different: everyone is guilty—there is not one innocent person anywhere. All that we can argue about is the degree of guilt. So is it for you, comrade Prosecutor, to accuse us? Only the dead, only those who did not survive, have the right to judge us. But the dead do not ask questions; the dead are silent. So please allow me to answer your question with another question. I'm speaking to you straightforwardly, man to man, from the heart, like a true Russian. What is the reason for this vile, universal weakness? Your weakness, our weakness, everyone's weakness? This mass submissiveness?

Prosecutor: You're evading the question.

(Enter a secretary. He holds out an envelope to the learned informer, saying, "Official.")

Learned Informer (after reading a sheet of paper, he holds it out to the prosecutor): Please have a look. On the occasion of my sixtieth birthday, my more than modest achievements in the field of Soviet science have been recognized.

Prosecutor (after reading the paper): In spite of myself, I can't but be glad for you. We are, after all, all

Soviet people.

Learned Informer: Yes, yes, of course we are. Thank you. (Muttering to himself.) Allow me, through the columns of your newspaper, to express my gratitude...to the institutions and organizations...and also to my comrades and friends...

Defense Counsel (striking a pose as he makes his final plea): Comrade Prosecutor and you, sworn jurymen! The comrade prosecutor has accused my client of evading the question put to him: Does he admit to even the least degree of guilt? But no more have you, comrade Prosecutor, answered the question put by my client to *you*: What is the reason for our mass submissiveness? Maybe it is human nature itself that has engendered informers, stool pigeons, writers of denunciations, collaborators with the security organs? Perhaps informers are born from the secretions of glands, from the pap slopping about our intestines, from the noise of gas in our stomachs, from mucous membranes, from the activity of the kidneys? Perhaps they are born from blind instinct—from the noseless, eyeless instinctual drives for nourishment, self-preservation, and reproduction?

But anyway, isn't it all the same whether or not informers are to blame? Whether they are to blame or whether they aren't, what is loathsome is the fact that they exist. The animal, vegetable, mineral, physiochemical side of human beings is horrible. It is from this slimy, hairy, base side of human nature that informers are born. The State does not itself give birth to people. Informers have sprouted from man. The hot steam of State terror breathed upon mankind and little grains that had been sleeping swelled and came to life. The State is the earth. If the earth has no grains lying hidden inside it, neither wheat nor tall weeds will grow from it. Humanity has only itself to blame for human filth.

But do you know the vilest thing of all about stool pigeons and informers? Do you think it is the bad in them?

No! The most terrible thing is the good in them; the saddest thing is that they are full of merits and good qualities.

They are loving and affectionate sons, fathers, and husbands...They are capable of real achievements of virtue and labor.

They love science, our great Russian literature, fine music. Some of them can talk boldly and intelligently about the most complicated aspects of modern philosophy and art...

And what good, devoted friends you can find among them! How touching they can be when they visit a comrade who has been taken to the hospital.

Among them are brave and patient soldiers who shared with their comrade their last crust of bread or last pinch of tobacco and who, in their own arms, carried a wounded, bleeding fighter off the field of battle.

And what gifted poets, musicians, physicists, and doctors there are among them. What skilled craftsmen—metalworkers and carpenters—men who are spoken of with admiration as having "golden hands."

This is what is so terrifying; that there is so much good in them, so much good in their human essence.

Whom, then, should we judge? Human nature! Human nature is what engenders these heaps of lies, all this meanness, cowardice, and weakness. But then human nature also engenders what is good, pure, and kind. Informers and stool pigeons are full of virtue, they should all be released and sent home—but how vile they are! Vile for all their virtues, vile even with all their sins absolved...Who was it who made that cruel joke about the proud sound made by the word "Man"?

Yes, yes, dark saturnine forces pushed them. They were subjected to billion-ton pressures—and no one among the living is innocent. All the living are guilty...You, the defendant, are guilty—and you, the prosecutor, and I myself, as I think about the defendant, the prosecutor, and the judge.

But why is all this so painful? Why does our human obscenity make us feel such shame?

“What the hell made me decide to go on foot?” Pinegin kept asking himself. He had no desire to think about that dark bad something that had slept for decades and then suddenly awoken. Whether or not he had done wrong was not what mattered; it was all just a matter of blind chance, of an unfortunate coincidence that had brought him face-to-face with a man he had ruined. Had they not bumped into each other on the street, the sleeper would have gone on sleeping.

But the sleeper had awoken, and Pinegin, though not quite realizing this, was feeling less and less convinced by these thoughts about blind chance. He was feeling more and more troubled and regretful: “No, it’s true: it was me who snitched on Vanechka and—and I didn’t need to. I destroyed the man, damn him! Otherwise we could have met today and everything would have been fine. Oh God, how grubby it all is. It’s as if I’d reached into some lady’s handbag, and she’d caught hold of my arm, and me with my driver, my advisers, my secretaries all standing around me...My God! How can one go on living when the whole world feels so dirty and grubby? Maybe my whole life is just vile and rotten. I should have lived it quite differently.”

And it was with a confused and heavy heart that Pinegin entered the Intourist restaurant, where the maître d’ and the doorman and the waiters had all known him for many years.

On catching sight of him, two cloakroom attendants sprang out from behind a partition, calling “G’day! G’day!” Prancing like young stallions, snorting with impatience, they stretched out their hands toward Pinegin’s luxurious accoutrements. They were quick, sharp-eyed Russian boys from an Intourist restaurant cloakroom—boys with a precise memory for who had been there before, what he had been wearing, and what he had happened to say. But they were, naturally, entirely openhearted and spontaneous with Pinegin, treating him, with his badge of a deputy to the city soviet, almost as if he were their immediate superior.

Unhurriedly, sensing beneath his feet the soft yet resilient pile of the carpet, Pinegin made his way through to the restaurant. The room was spacious; it had high ceilings and was filled with a solemn half-light. Pinegin slowly breathed in the calm air, which was cool and warm at the same time, and looked around at the tables with their starched tablecloths; vodka glasses, wineglasses, and cut-glass vases with flowers were all gleaming softly. He made his way to a familiar and comfortable spot beneath the intricate foliage of a philodendron.

As he passed between little tables displaying the miniature flags of various world powers, it seemed to him that these tables were battleships and cruisers, and that he was an admiral reviewing his fleet.

This sense of himself as an admiral made it easier to go on living, and he sat down at his little table. Without hurrying, he reached out for the dark, olive-green menu that looked more like the certificate awarded to some laureate. Opening it, he focused on the section: “Hors d’Oeuvres.”

Examining the names of dishes, which were printed both in his native Russian and in other major world languages, he turned over a stiff, crackling page, glanced at “Soups,” chewed his lips for a moment and then looked sideways at “Meat Dishes” and “Game Dishes.”

He hesitated, torn between Meat and Game. With perfect timing, guessing his predicament, the waiter pronounced, “The sirloin’s quite exceptional today.”

Pinegin did not reply for a long time. “All right then,” he said finally. “Sirloin it is.”

He sat in the half-light and the quiet, his eyes half closed—and the full weight of his own sense of rectitude battled with the fire and ice of repentance, with the confusion and horror that had suddenly been resurrected within him.

Then the heavy velvet over the doorway into the kitchen gently parted, and Pinegin recognized the bald head of a waiter— *his* waiter.

Out of the half dark a tray was floating toward him, and Pinegin saw ash-pink salmon surrounded by small lemon suns, dusky caviar, the hothouse green of cucumbers, the steep sides of a vodka decanter, and a bottle of Borzhomi mineral water.

He was not really so very much of a gourmet, nor was he even feeling so very hungry, but it was at this precise moment that that old man, that old man in a padded jacket, ceased for a second time to trouble his sense of rectitude.

9

Back at the railway station, Ivan Grigoryevich began to feel that there was no point in wandering about Leningrad any longer. He stood inside the cold, high building and pondered. And it is possible that one or two of the people who passed by the gloomy old man looking up at the black departures board may have thought, “There—a Russian from the camps, a man at a crossroads, contemplating, choosing which path to follow.”

But he was not choosing a path; he was thinking.

During the course of his life, dozens of interrogators had understood that he was neither a monarchist, nor a Socialist Revolutionary, nor a Social Democrat; that he had never been part of either the Trotskyist or the Bukharinist opposition. He had never been an Orthodox Christian or an Old Believer; nor was he a Seventh-Day Adventist.

There in the station, thinking about the painful days he had just spent in Moscow and Leningrad, he remembered a conversation with a tsarist artillery general who had at one time slept next to him on the bedboards of a camp barrack. The old man had said, “I’m not leaving the camp to go anywhere else. It’s warm in here. There are people I know. Now and again someone gives me a lump of sugar, or a bit of pie from a food parcel.”

He had met such old men more than once. They had lost all desire to leave the camp. It was their home. They were fed at regular hours. Kind comrades sometimes gave them little scraps. There was the warmth of the stove.

Where indeed were they to go? In the calcified depths of their hearts some of them stored memories of the brilliance of the chandeliers in the palaces of Tsarskoye Selo, or of the winter sun in Nice. Others remembered their neighbor, Mendeleyev, coming around to drink tea with them; or they remembered Scriabin, Repin, or the young Blok. Others preserved, beneath ash that was still warm, the memories of Plekhanov, Gershuni, and Trigoni, of friends of the great Zhelyabov. There were occasions when old men released from a camp had asked to be readmitted. The whirl of life outside had knocked them off their feet. Their legs were weak and trembling, and they had been terrified by the cold and the solitude of the vast cities.

Ivan Grigoryevich now felt like going back again behind the barbed wire himself. He wanted to seek out those who had got to feel so accustomed to their barrack stoves, so at home with their warm rags and their bowls of thin gruel. He wanted to say to them, “Yes, freedom really is terrifying.”

And he would have told these frail old men how he had visited a close relative, how he had stood outside the home of the woman he loved, how he had bumped into a comrade from his student days who had offered to help him. And then he would have gone on to say to these old men of the camps that there is no higher happiness than to leave the camp, even blind and legless, to creep out of the camp on one’s stomach and die—even only ten yards from that accursed barbed wire.

When he at last succeeded, after some difficulty, in finding himself a job and somewhere to live, Ivan Grigoryevich felt a sense of peace and sadness. He had been taken on as a metalworker in a small workshop that employed the disabled. The sacred stamp, that of a residence permit, appeared in his passport, and he began living in a small room that he rented for just forty old rubles a month from the widow of one Sergeant Mikhalyov, who had died in the war.

Anna Sergeyevna was thin and, although her hair was going gray, she was still young. With her lived her twelve-year-old nephew, the son of a sister who had died. He had a pale face and he went around in a jacket that had been much patched and darned. He was the kind of astonishingly quiet, timid, and inquisitive boy that you find only in an extremely poor family.

On the wall there was a photograph of Sergeant Mikhalyov, looking rather gloomy, as if he already foresaw his fate. Anna Sergeyevna's son was doing his military service—as a guard in a labor camp. A photograph of him, with fat cheeks and short, close-clipped hair, hung beside that of his father.

Sergeant Mikhalyov had gone missing during the first days of the war. His unit had been annihilated, not far from the frontier, by German tanks, and there had been no one to give evidence as to whether Mikhalyov had been left on the battlefield, killed by submachine-gun fire, or whether he had surrendered to the Germans. And so the authorities had refused Anna Sergeyevna's application for a pension .

Anna Sergeyevna worked as a cook, in a canteen. Nevertheless, she did not live well. Her elder sister, who worked on a collective farm, once sent her a food parcel for their orphaned nephew: round loaves made from rye flour and bran, and a jar of cloudy honey with bits of wax in it.

And if ever the chance arose, Anna Sergeyevna used, for her part, to send food parcels to her sister on the collective farm: flour, sunflower oil, and, sometimes, white bread and sugar.

Ivan Grigoryevich could not understand how, working in a kitchen, Anna Sergeyevna could be so pale and thin. Among a crowd of prisoners, it had always been easy to recognize the fat face of a cook.

Anna Sergeyevna did not ask Ivan Grigoryevich about his past in the camps. (He had been questioned in great detail by the workshop personnel officer.) But she was a woman of understanding—and she understood a great deal simply from observing Ivan Grigoryevich.

He was able to sleep on bare boards; he drank plain hot water with neither tea nor sugar; he ate stale bread; he wore footcloths rather than socks. He had no bed linen, but she noticed that his shirt collar was always clean, even though the shirt had been washed so many times that it had gone yellow. And in the mornings he always took out a chipped, battered little box that had once contained fruit drops and that now contained his washing things; he would brush his teeth and carefully soap his face, his neck, and his arms up to his elbows.

He found it hard to get used to the silence at night. For decades he had been accustomed to the polyphony of snores; to all the snuffling, muttering, and groaning of the hundreds of men asleep in the barrack; to the knocking of the night watchman's rattle; or to the grinding of wheels of a prisoner transport train. He had been alone only in the punishment cell and during one period of the initial investigation, when he had been kept in solitary confinement for three and a half months. But the silence at night now was not the tense silence of solitary confinement.

He had been lucky to find the job in the workshop. In the town park he had got to talking to a consumptive man whose back was so bent that it looked like a sledge runner standing on end, and this man had told him that he was giving up his job as a bookkeeper in a cooperative for the disabled and was going to leave the town. He was leaving, he explained, because he did not want to be buried in a town where the cemetery was located in a swamp and the coffins were all floating in water. He wanted to lie in comfort after his death. He had saved up for an oak coffin; he had bought some good-quality red cloth to line it; and he had also stocked up on brass-headed nails—the kind you see on the leather-upholstered benches in the railway station. He had no wish at all to be soaking in water along with all these treasures.

He spoke about all this in the voice of a man about to move to a new, more comfortable apartment.

It was on the recommendation of "the man with the new apartment," as he privately christened him, that Ivan Grigoryevich managed to get himself taken on at the cooperative, which produced locks and keys, as well as tinning and soldering kitchen utensils. Ivan Grigoryevich's past experience came in useful—at one time he had been a metalworker in a camp repair shop.

The other workers included injured veterans from the Great Patriotic War, as well as men who had been crippled in accidents in factories or on the roads and railways; there were even three old men who had been crippled as long ago as the First World War. There was also Mordan, another old-timer from the camps; he had formerly lived in Leningrad and worked in the Putilov Factory. He had been sentenced under Article 58 in 1936 and had been freed after the end of the war. Mordan did not want to return to Leningrad, where his wife and daughter had died during the Siege, and he had moved to this southern town to live with his sister.

The other workers were, for the main part, good-humored people who preferred to look on the bright side of things. Now and again, however, one of them would have a fit, and his screams as he began to writhe on the floor would mingle with the banging of hammers and the squeal of files.

Ptashkovsky, a tinsmith with a gray mustache, had been taken prisoner by the Russians during the First World War (people said he was Austrian, just pretending to be a Pole). Suddenly his arms would go completely numb and he would freeze there on his little stool, his hammer raised in the air, his face immobile and haughty. Someone would have to shake him by the shoulder to bring him out of this paralysis. There had been an occasion when one man had a fit, and this proved catching; in different corners of the workshop young and old alike had writhed on the floor and screamed.

There was one thing very new for Ivan Grigoryevich: he was working as a free laborer, with no guards escorting him to his workplace, with no sentries looking down from their watchtowers. This felt astonishingly good. It was also strange: the work was much the same, the tools were familiar, but no one called you a shit and neither *thieves* nor *bitche s* threatened you or shook their bludgeons at you.

Ivan Grigoryevich quickly found out what people did to increase their meager earnings. Some people made teapots and saucepans out of materials they had bought themselves, selling them through the cooperative at the official price but keeping the money. Others made private agreements to do repair jobs for customers, not writing out any bills or receipts. Once again, they charged the official price, neither more nor less.

Mordan, a man whose hands looked big enough to be used for shoveling winter snow off the sidewalks, talked during one of their lunch breaks about an incident the previous day in the apartment next to his own. Five people lived in this apartment: a lathe operator, a tailor, an electrician who worked in a small factory, and two widows. One of these widows worked in a sewing workshop, the other as a cleaner in the building of the town soviet. And then on one of their days off the two widows met unexpectedly in the police station; officers from the Department for the Struggle Against Speculation and the Theft of Socialist Property had picked them up on the street for selling the string shopping bags that they wove at night in their rooms, neither of them saying a word to the other about what she was doing. The police then searched the apartment and discovered that the tailor was making boys' and women's coats at night. The electrician, for his part, had installed a small electric stove under the floorboards; on it he baked wafers that his wife sold in the market. As for the lathe operator from the Red Torch factory, he turned out to be a nighttime cobbler; his specialty was smart ladies' shoes. And the widows were not only weaving string bags but also knitting ladies' cardigans.

Mordan made his listeners laugh as he acted out, first, how the electrician had shouted that the wafers were for his family, and then, how the theft and speculation inspector had asked him how long his family would take to get through seventy pounds of dough. In the end, each speculator had been fined three hundred rubles. Each had been reported to his or her workplace—and each had been threatened with deportation, "in order to purge Soviet life of parasites and unproductive elements."

Mordan liked to use elevated words. Examining a damaged lock, he would say gravely, "Yes, the key doesn't react at all on the lock."

Once, as they were going down the street together after finishing work, Mordan suddenly said to Ivan Grigoryevich, "It's not only because of my wife and daughter that I didn't go back to Leningrad. It's the Putilov proletariat...As a worker myself, I can't bear to see what's happened to them. They can't even go out on strike. How can we call ourselves workers if we don't have the right to strike?"

In the evenings Anna Sergeyevna would bring some food back for her nephew: some soup in a little tin can, a main course in a clay pot.

"Maybe you'd like something to eat?" she would say quietly to Ivan Grigoryevich. "We've got plenty."

"But you don't eat yourself," Ivan Grigoryevich would reply. "I've noticed."

"I eat all day—because of my work," she said once. Guessing what he was thinking, she went on, "But I do get very tired."

At first Ivan Grigoryevich had thought that there was something unkind about his landlady's face. Then he realized he had been wrong: she was a kind woman.

Sometimes she talked about life on the collective farm. She had been a brigade leader; for a while she had even been the farm chairman. She explained to him that the collective farms often failed to fulfill the plan. Too little land had been sown; or there would be a severe drought; or the land had been squeezed dry and it no longer yielded anything; or everyone except the old women and children had managed to get away to the city...And if a collective farm failed to deliver its quota of produce, then its members would receive only six or seven kopeks per labor day , plus a hundred grams of grain. And there were years when they did not receive even a single gram. And people don't like working for nothing...The collective farmers went about in rags. Clean black bread, without the addition of potatoes and acorns, was—like cake—something they ate only on special occasions. Once Anna Sergeyevna had brought her older sister some white bread, and her sister's children had been afraid to eat it; they had never seen white bread before. As for the peasants' huts, they were all falling apart—for lack of new timber.

Ivan Grigoryevich listened to Anna Sergeyevna and watched her. She gave off a soft light of kindness and femininity. For decades he had hardly seen any women, but what endless stories he had heard about them in the barracks. Sad stories, filthy stories, bloody stories. And the women in these stories were either so degraded as to be worse than animals or else so pure and sublime as to stand above the saints. But the prisoners had been no more able to do without their thoughts of women than they had been able to do without their ration of bread. Women had been with them all the time—in their talk, in the purest and in the dirtiest of their dreams and reveries.

Since his release Ivan Grigoryevich had seen beautiful, elegant women on the streets of Moscow and Leningrad, and he had sat at a table with the gray-haired, still-beautiful Maria Pavlovna. But nothing—neither his grief on learning that the love of his youth had betrayed him, nor the charm of elegant female beauty, nor the sense of comfort and well-being in the home of Maria Pavlovna—nothing had made him feel what he felt as he listened to Anna Sergeyevna, as he looked at her sad eyes, at a face that might be faded but that was still sweet, still young.

But then this was not really so very strange. How could it be? It was simply what had always happened, what had happened for millennia, between a man and a woman.

Anna Sergeyevna went on talking about the collective farm: "Forcing hungry people to go out and work in the fields became more than my soul could bear. Lenin may have been right to say that a cook can govern the State, but that certainly isn't true of me. Women working on the threshing machine used to make themselves special stockings and sew them into the insides of their skirts. They used to fill these stockings with grain. It was my job to search them and start criminal proceedings against them. But the minimum sentence for theft of collective-farm property is seven years. And the women had children. I used to lie awake at night and think it all through: the State was taking grain from the collective farm for six kopeks per kilo and selling a loaf of bread for a ruble. And in *our* collective farm we hadn't been given so much as a gram of grain for four years. And if someone steals a fistful of grain—of the grain that they have, like it or not, sown themselves, they get seven years...No, I just couldn't go along with it. And so some fellow villagers got me a job here in a canteen, feeding people. Here I hear workers say, 'In spite of everything, life's better here in the town.' A construction worker gets two and a half rubles for hanging a door and putting in a lock. If he does the same job privately, on his day off, he gets paid fifty rubles. So he gets twenty-five times less from the State. All the same, the workers are right—the State really does take still more than that from the peasants. The way I see it, the State takes too much from everyone, both in towns and in villages. I know it has to pay for houses of recreation so that people can go on holiday, and for schools and tractors, and for defense...I do understand all that, but I still think it takes too much from all of us. It should take less."

She looked at Ivan Grigoryevich. "Is it possible," she said, "that this has put the whole of our lives out of kilter?"

She slowly turned her eyes from Ivan Grigoryevich's face to her nephew's and added, "I do realize we're not meant to talk about these things. But I can see what kind of man you are. Otherwise, I wouldn't ask such a question. But you haven't the least idea what kind of person I am—so don't answer!"

"You don't need to say that," said Ivan Grigoryevich. "I certainly will answer. I used to think that freedom was freedom of speech, freedom of the press, freedom of conscience. But freedom needs to include all of the lives of all of the people. Freedom is the right to sow what you want. It's the right to make boots or shoes, it's the right to bake bread from the grain you've sown and to sell it or not sell it as you choose. It's the same whether you're a locksmith or a steelworker or an artist—freedom is the right to live and work as you wish and not as you're ordered to. But there's no freedom for anyone—whether you write books, whether you sow grain, or whether you make boots."

That night Ivan Grigoryevich lay in the dark and listened to someone's sleepy breathing. The sound was so quiet that he could not make out whether it was the child's or the woman's.

He felt strange. It was as if he had been traveling all his life, as if night and day he had been in a creaking railway wagon, listening to the constant knock-knock of the wheels. And now at last he had arrived—the train had stopped.

And yet there was still a ringing in his ears. The din from those thirty years of travel was still echoing in his head. It seemed as if the prisoners were still in transit, still on their way...

But the noise in his head was not the noise of the railway. It was the grating sound of old age. How much longer, after all, did he have to live?

Alyosha, Anna Sergeyevna's nephew, was so short that he looked as if he were only eight years old. He was, however, already twelve; he was in his sixth year at school. After coming home, fetching the water, and washing the dishes, he would sit and do his homework.

Sometimes he would look up at Ivan Grigoryevich and say, "Could you test me on history, please?"

Once, when Alyosha was preparing for a biology lesson and Ivan Grigoryevich had nothing to do, he began molding from clay the various animals shown in the textbook: a giraffe, a rhinoceros, a gorilla. Alyosha was dumbfounded—the clay animals were so good that he couldn't take his eyes off them. He couldn't stop moving them about; at night he arranged them on a chair next to his bed. At dawn, on his way out to go and queue for the milk, the boy saw Ivan Grigoryevich washing his face in the corridor. In an impassioned whisper he said, "Ivan Grigoryevich, may I take your animals to school with me?"

"Please do—they're yours," said Ivan Grigoryevich.

In the evening, Alyosha told Ivan Grigoryevich that the art teacher had said, "Please tell your lodger that he really must go and study."

This was the first time that Anna Sergeyevna had seen Ivan Grigoryevich laugh. She said, "Don't laugh, go and see the woman. Maybe you can make some money at home in the evenings. After all, what kind of life can you have on three hundred and seventy-five rubles a month?"

"That's enough for me. What would I do with more?" said Ivan Grigoryevich. "And as for studying, it's too late now. That's something I should have done thirty years ago."

But at the same time he was saying to himself, "What am I getting so agitated about? Does this mean I've still got some life in me? That I'm not dead yet?"

Once, Ivan Grigoryevich was telling Alyosha about the conquests of Tamburlaine when he noticed that Anna Sergeyevna had put down her sewing and was listening to him intently.

"You shouldn't be working in that workshop," she said with a smile.

"I'd be no good anywhere else," he said. "My knowledge comes from books with half the pages torn out, with no beginning or end."

Alyosha realized that this must be why Ivan Grigoryevich told stories his own way, while the teachers just plowed through textbooks.

The little episode with the clay animals agitated Ivan Grigoryevich...Not that he had any real talent himself—but what a lot of deaths of talented people he had witnessed. Young physicists and historians, specialists in ancient languages, philosophers, musicians, young Russian Swifts and Erasmuses—how many of them he had seen put on their "wooden jackets."

Prerevolutionary literature had often lamented the fate of serf actors, musicians, and painters. But who was there today to write about the young men and women who had never had the chance to write their books and paint their paintings? The Russian earth is indeed fertile and generous. She gives birth to her own Platos, to her own quick-witted Newtons—but how casually and terribly she devours these children of hers.

Theaters and cinemas made Ivan Grigoryevich feel sad and anxious; it was as if he were being forced to watch something there and would never be let out again. Many novels and poems felt like a violent assault, as if the writer were trying to drum something into his head; he found this unbearable. These books seemed to be about a life he had never encountered—a life where there were no barracks, no strict-regime camps, no brigade leaders, no armed guards, no security officers, no system of internal passports, and none of the sufferings, anxieties, and passions that made up the lives of everyone around him.

The writers simply dreamed people up. They dreamed up their thoughts and feelings; they dreamed up the rooms they lived in and the trains they traveled in. The literature that called itself "realist" was as convention-ridden as the bucolic romances of the eighteenth century. The collective farmers, workers, and peasant women of Soviet literature seemed close kin to those elegant, slim villagers and curly-headed shepherdesses in woodland glades, playing on reed pipes and dancing, surrounded by little white lambs with pretty blue ribbons.

During his years in the camps Ivan Grigoryevich had learned a great deal about human weaknesses. Now he saw that there were more than enough such weaknesses outside the barbed wire as well as behind it...No, suffering did not always purify. In the camps the struggle for an extra mouthful of soup, for an easier work assignment, was unrelenting, and the morally weak stooped to a pitiful level. Sometimes Ivan Grigoryevich tried to guess how people he met now might behave in the camps; it was not difficult to imagine some sleek and haughty figure scavenging about, scraping his spoon around someone else's empty soup bowl or prowling around the kitchen in search of potato peelings or rotten cabbage leaves.

Ivan Grigoryevich had felt sorry for those who had been crushed by violence, by hunger and cold, by their desperate need for tobacco. He had felt sorry for those who had turned into "camp jackals," always on the lookout for a crumb of bread or a slobbery cigarette butt.

What he had seen in the camps made it easier to understand how people behaved when they were free. What he saw now was the same pitiful weakness, the same cruelty, the same greed, and the same terror that

he had seen in the camps. People were the same everywhere, and Ivan Grigoryevich felt sorry for them.

The role of the characters in Soviet novels and long poems, however, like that of the figures in medieval art, was to express the ideal of the Church, to proclaim the one true God: man existed not for his own sake but for God's sake, in order to glorify God and His Church. Some writers, those most adept at passing off lies as truth, took particular pains over the details of the clothes and furniture they described. They then peopled their realistic stage sets with idealized, God-seeking characters.

Neither within nor outside the camps were people willing to admit that they all had an equal right to freedom. Some of the Right Deviationists believed themselves to be innocent but thought that it had been right to sentence the Left Deviationists. Left and Right Deviationists were alike in their hatred of spies—of those who had corresponded with relatives abroad or who simply had Polish, Latvian, or German surnames that they had inherited from Russified parents.

And however much the peasants insisted that they had worked all their lives by the sweat of their brow, the political prisoners refused to believe them: "A likely story! Why would the authorities arrest a peasant unless he's exploiting others?"

Ivan Grigoryevich had once said to a former Red Army commander, his neighbor on the bedboards, "You're a hero of the Civil War. You dedicated your whole life to the ideals of Bolshevism. And now here you are—sentenced for espionage!"

The man had replied, "With me they made a mistake. There haven't been any others—I'm a special case."

When the camp criminals picked on a new victim and began tormenting or robbing him, the political prisoners did nothing. Some looked the other way; some sat there with blank, unseeing faces; some ran away; others pulled blankets over their heads and pretended to be asleep.

Hundreds of political prisoners—hundreds of *zeks* — among whom were former soldiers and war heroes, proved helpless against a small number of common criminals. The latter were a law unto themselves; they, after all, were true Russian patriots—unlike the Fascist *zeks*, who were enemies of the Motherland. People in the camps were like dry grains of sand; there was no solidarity between them.

One man believed that the authorities had got it wrong in his case but that, in general, "people aren't sent to the camps for nothing."

Others reasoned as follows: "When we were free, we thought that people aren't sent to the camps for nothing. Now, however, we know firsthand that that *does* happen." But they drew no conclusions; they merely sighed submissively.

An emaciated, constantly twitching former official of the Youth Comintern, an expert in Marxist dialectics, explained to Ivan Grigoryevich that he had committed no crimes against the Party but that the security organs had been right to arrest him as a double-dealer and spy; though he himself had done nothing wrong, he belonged to a social stratum that was hostile to the Party, a stratum that spawned whiners and doubters, double-dealers, Trotskyists, and "opportunists in practice."

An intelligent man, once an important Party official at the provincial level, said to Ivan Grigoryevich, "When a forest is being felled, splinters fly—but the truth of the Party still holds true. This truth is more important than my misfortune." He then pointed to himself and added, "So here I am—one of those splinters."

He was at a loss for words when Ivan Grigoryevich replied, "That's just it—they're felling the forest. Why do they need to fell the forest?"

Only very occasionally did Ivan Grigoryevich meet anyone who had actually done anything against the Soviet government.

Former tsarist officers had been sentenced not because they had formed monarchist organizations but because they might have formed monarchist organizations.

There were Social Democrats and Socialist Revolutionaries in the camps. Most of them had been arrested after they had ceased their political activities and become ordinary, loyal Soviet citizens. They had been arrested not for opposing the Soviet State but because it was thought possible that they might oppose it.

It was not for actually opposing the collective farms that peasants were sent to the camps. The peasants who were sent to the camps were those who *might*, under certain conditions, have opposed the collective farms.

People were sent to the camps for entirely innocent criticisms—for disliking the books and plays that had won State prizes or for disliking Soviet wireless sets and fountain pens. Might not such people, under certain conditions, become enemies of the State?

People were sent to the camps for corresponding with aunts or brothers who lived abroad. They were sent to the camps because there was a greater probability of their becoming spies than there would have been if they did not have such relatives.

State terror was directed not against those who had committed crimes but against those who, according to the security organs, were somewhat more likely to commit crimes.

Quite distinct from these people were those who really had fought against the Soviet government: elderly Socialist Revolutionaries, Mensheviks, and anarchists; men who had fought for the independence of Latvia, Estonia, Lithuania, and Ukraine; men who had fought under the command of Stepan Bandera.

The Soviet *zeks* looked on these men as their enemies. At the same time they could not help admiring men who had been imprisoned for an actual reason.

In one strict-regime camp, Ivan Grigoryevich met an adolescent schoolboy, Boria Romashkin, who had been

sentenced for ten years. Boria really had written leaflets accusing the State of executing innocent people; he really had typed them out on a typewriter; he really had stuck them up at night on the walls of buildings in Moscow. Boria told Ivan Grigoryevich that during the investigation, dozens of KGB officers—among them several generals—had come to see him, all of them curious about this young lad who had been arrested for a genuine reason. In the camp too, Boria was famous. Everybody knew about him; prisoners from neighboring camps asked about him. When Ivan Grigoryevich was sent eight hundred kilometers to a new camp, he heard talk of Boria Romashkin the very first evening—his story had traveled all over Kolyma.

There was one surprising thing: people sentenced for a genuine reason, for active opposition to the Soviet state, thought that all political *zeks* were innocent—and that they should all of them, without exception, be freed. But those who had been framed, those who had been imprisoned on trumped-up charges—these millions of people tended to believe that only they themselves should be pardoned. They attempted to prove that all the falsely accused "spies," "kulaks," and "saboteurs" really were guilty; they attempted to justify the brutality of the State.

There was one profound difference between people living in the camps and people living in freedom. People in the camps stayed loyal to the time that had engendered them. Different epochs of Russian life lived on in the thoughts, in the psychological makeup of each person. There were people who had taken part in the Civil War, with their own favorite songs, heroes, and books; there were Greens; there were followers of Petlyura with the still-raging passions of *their* time, with their own songs, poems, and mannerisms. There were Comintern workers from the 1920s, with their own particular earnest enthusiasm, with their own characteristic vocabulary and philosophy, with their own special demeanor and ways of pronouncing words. There were men who were really very old indeed—monarchists, Mensheviks, Socialist Revolutionaries—and who preserved within them a whole world of ideas, rules of conduct, and literary heroes that went back some forty or fifty years.

In a ragged, cough-ridden old man you could instantly recognize a noble, though degraded and weak-willed, officer from a guards regiment, and in the no less ragged man lying beside him on the bedboards, his face covered with the same gray stubble, an unrepentant Social Democrat. And in a stooping figure with a cushy job as a medical orderly you could glimpse a man who had been the commissar of an armored train during the Civil War.

Elderly people living in freedom, on the other hand, were not marked by any such inimitable signs of their past. In them the past had been erased. They entered easily into new ways of thinking and feeling and lived their lives in accordance with the present day; their vocabulary and thoughts, their passions, even their sincerest desires all changed submissively and compliantly, in tune with the course of events and the will of their superiors.

What is the reason for this difference? Is it that a man becomes frozen in the camps, as if under anesthetic?

When he had been in the camps, Ivan Grigoryevich had constantly seen people's natural longing to escape beyond the barbed wire, to return to their wives and children. But after his release, he sometimes met other former *zeks* —and their submissive hypocrisy, their fear of their own thoughts, their dread of being re-arrested were so overwhelming that they seemed more truly and thoroughly imprisoned than when they had been doing forced labor.

Leaving the camp, working as a free laborer, living with his nearest and dearest, such a man would sometimes doom himself to a higher power of imprisonment, a more complete and profound imprisonment than anything he had been subjected to behind the barbed wire.

Nevertheless, in the torment, in the dirt and murk of camp life, it was freedom that was the light and strength of the prisoners' souls. Freedom was immortal.

In this small southern town, in the home of the widow of Sergeant Mikhalyov, Ivan Grigoryevich began to get a broader, deeper sense of the nature of freedom.

People's small, everyday struggles, the efforts made by workers to earn an extra ruble by moonlighting, the peasants' natural desire to fight for some of the bread and potatoes they had themselves grown—all this represented not only the wish for a more comfortable life, not only the wish to feed and clothe one's children well. The struggle for the right to make boots, to knit a cardigan, to sow what one wants to sow—all this was a manifestation of man's natural and indestructible aspiration toward freedom. This aspiration was, he knew, no less indestructible in the souls of the *zeks.* On either side of the barbed wire freedom seemed immortal.

After work one evening he began making a mental list of items of camp vocabulary. There was, O God, a camp word for every letter of the alphabet. And you could write whole articles, narrative poems, and novels about each of them.

Arest (Arrest), *Barak* (Barrack)...all the way through to *Yushka* (a kind of watery soup) and *Zona* (the entire territory of the camp). A vast world with its own language, its own economy, and its own moral code. Yes, one could fill whole shelves with books about it—even more than with the countless volumes of Gorky's *History of Factories and Mills.*

There would be many areas of subject matter. One would be the story of prisoners' transports: how they were organized, the journey itself, how the prisoners were guarded...To one of today's prisoners the transports of the 1920s seem unbelievably naive and cozy. A compartment in a passenger train, a philosophically inclined guard who offers you pies to eat...The first timid buds of the world of the camps, a chick barely

emerged from the egg, a bygone age...

Compare all that with a transport on its way to Krasnoyarsk today: a mobile prison city, made up of sixty four-axle goods wagons; tiny barred windows; three layers of bedboards; store wagons; kitchen wagons; wagons for the guard dogs that roam around the train when it stops; carriages for the guards themselves...And the boss of the entire transport, surrounded like a fairy-tale pasha by whoring concubines and fawning cooks. And the inspections and head counts...A supervisor climbs into the wagon while the other guards stand by the open doors, pointing their submachine guns at the *zeks* huddled together in one end of the wagon. The supervisor orders the *zeks*, one at a time, to the other end of the wagon—and however fast they move, he always manages to give them a blow with his stick, either on the arse or on the head.

And not long ago, after the Great Patriotic War, steel combs were installed underneath the tail wagon of each train. If a *zek* managed to dismantle the floorboards and throw himself prone between the rails, this comb would seize him, yank him up, and hurl him underneath the wheels—no use, by then, to God or man. And in case someone broke through the ceiling and climbed up onto the roof of a wagon, searchlights were installed on each train. From the locomotive to the very last wagon, their sharp beams pierced through the darkness—and if there was a man on the roof, the machine gun looking down the train knew only too well what to do. Yes, everything continues to evolve. The transport's economic system had also continued to perfect itself; there was surplus product everywhere. The guard officers were by then enjoying real comfort in the headquarters car; they and their men were receiving additional rations, levied from those intended for the dogs and the *zeks*, as well as being paid a large displacement allowance in consideration of the sixty days it took the transport to reach the camps of eastern Siberia. And each wagon saw its own economic processes, its own internal circulation of goods, its own harsh reality compounded of primitive accumulation and attendant pauperization. Yes, everything flows, everything changes, it's impossible to step twice into the same transport.

But who can describe the despair of this journey, this journey that took men from their wives? Who can describe the nighttime confessions to the accompaniment of the creaks of the wagons and the iron clickety-clack of their wheels? Who can describe people's submissiveness and trustfulness in the course of this slow plunge into the abyss of the camps? Who can describe the *zeks'* letters—the letters the *zeks* threw from the dark of the freight wagons into the dark of the great mailbox of the Russian steppe, and that sometimes, unbelievably, reached their destination?

In the train everything is unfamiliar. You have yet to develop camp habits. Your body is not exhausted, your mind is not dazed by the many concerns of camp life. Your heart is raw and bleeding. Everything is strange and terrible: the half dark, the creaking, the rough boards, the hysterical twitching *thieves*, the quartzlike stare of the guards.

Ivan remembered a young boy being lifted up to the little window. He shouted out, "Grandad, Grandad, where are they taking us?"

And everyone in the freight wagon heard an old man reply in a cracked, drawn-out voice, "To Siberia, dear child, to forced labor."

And Ivan Grigoryevich suddenly said to himself, "Did all this really happen to me? Has this been my journey, my fate? It was with those transports that my road began. And now it has reached its end."

These camp memories kept coming back to him. There were no links between them, and this chaotic quality was painful and tormenting. But he felt, he knew that it was possible to make sense of this chaos, that this was not beyond him. His journey through the camps was now over and it was time to see clearly, time to discern the laws of this chaos of suffering where guilt was juxtaposed with holy innocence, where false confessions of crimes lived beside fanatical loyalty to the Party, where senseless absurdity—the murder of millions of innocent and loyal people—masqueraded as cast-iron logic.

Ivan Grigoryevich had said very little during the last few days. He had hardly spoken to Anna Sergeyevna. But he had thought a lot about her and about Alyosha when he was at work, and he was always looking at the small pendulum clock on the wall: How much longer till he could go home?

And for some reason, during these days that he spent quietly thinking about life in the camps, what he found himself constantly dwelling on was the fate of the camp women...Never, it seemed, had he thought so much about women.

It is not universities and works of sociology that have affirmed women's equality with men. It is not only factory work, space flight, and the fire of revolution that have proved this equality. In the history of Russia this equality has been established now and always, forever and ever, by the suffering of serfdom, the suffering undergone in prisons and transports, the suffering in the camps.

Before the face of centuries of serfdom, before the face of Kolyma, Norilsk, and Vorkuta, woman has become the equal of man.

The camps also confirmed a second truth, a truth as simple as one of the commandments: the lives of men and women cannot be separated.

There is satanic power in a prohibition, in a dam. The water of streams and rivers, blocked by a dam, reveals a dark, secret power. This power can be concealed for a while by melodious splashes, by the play of sunlight on water, by swaying water lilies—but all of a sudden the implacable fury of water is crushing stone or driving the blades of a turbine with insane speed.

When a barrier separates human beings from their daily bread, the power of hunger becomes no less pitiless. The natural and benign need for food turns into something cruel and bestial, a force that destroys millions of lives and compels mothers to eat their own children.

The prohibition that separates men and women in the camps warps their bodies and warps their souls.

A woman's tenderness, her readiness to care for others, her sexual passion, her maternal instincts—all this constitutes the bread of life, the water of life. All this comes to be in a woman because there are husbands, sons, fathers, and brothers in the world. And that the world contains wives, mothers, daughters, and sisters fulfills the life of a man.

But then a prohibition appears. And everything simple and good—the bread of life and the water of life—suddenly becomes dark and evil.

Like some act of sorcery, a prohibition imposed by force invariably transforms what is good within a human being into something evil.

Between the camps for male and female common criminals there always lay a strip of bare earth, known as the "shooting zone." The moment anyone appeared in this no-man's-land, machine guns would open fire. Nevertheless, the male criminals would try to creep across on their bellies, they would dig tunnels, they would try to slip under or over the barbed wire; and those who were unlucky were left lying on the ground with broken legs and bullet holes in their heads. It was like the frantic, tragic struggle of spawning fish to make their way up a river that has been blocked by dams.

In some strict-regime camps the women had not seen a man's face or heard a man's voice for many years. There were occasions when carpenters, metalworkers, and drivers were sent into these sinister places—and torn apart, tortured to death. Even the male criminals were terrified of these camps—camps where it was considered a joy merely to touch the shoulder of a dead man with one hand. The criminals were scared to go there even under armed guard.

Dark, somber misery twisted and mutilated human beings, until they ceased to be human.

Women forced other women into concubinage. The camps created a new, absurd breed of woman: bull dykes with hoarse voices, women with bold gestures and long male strides, women who wore trousers that they tucked into soldiers' tarpaulin boots. And at their side were their lost, pathetic *chicks*.

The bull dykes drank *chifir* and smoked *makhorka*. When they were drunk, they would beat up their frivolous, cheating girlfriends, but they also used their fists and their knives to protect these girlfriends from insult or from anyone else's advances. Such was the nature of love in a labor camp—tragic and monstrous. Even among the criminals and murderers these relationships did not inspire laughter or dirty jokes—only fear and horror.

The frenzy that was labor-camp love did not recognize the vast distances of the *taiga* ; it ignored the barbed wire, the stone walls of the guardhouse, the locks of the disciplinary barracks; it flung itself against wolfhounds, against knife blades, against the guards' rifles. It did indeed recall salmon coming up from the ocean to spawn—their backbones broken, their eyes half out of their sockets, yet still hurling themselves against the rocks and boulders of mountain rapids and waterfalls.

And at the same time men cherished the love of their wives and their mothers. And camp "correspondence brides," who had never seen and never would see the camp "grooms" they had chosen, were prepared to undergo any suffering in order to remain faithful to their dispossessed chosen one, to remain faithful to illusions they had dreamed up.

A lot can be forgiven anyone who, in the filth and stench of camp violence, remains a human being.

Dear, quiet little Mashenka...She is no longer wearing her fine stockings and her blue woolen cardigan. It's hard to keep neat and tidy in a freight wagon. She keeps listening intently to the strange language—it hardly even seems like Russian—of the women thieves who are her neighbors on the bedboards. She looks with horror at the transport tsaritsa, the pale-lipped hysterical mistress of a famous Rostov thief.

Masha washes her handkerchief in a mug. Then she uses the last drops of water to clean her feet, spreads the kerchief out on her knees to dry, and peers out into the half dark.

The last few months are a blurred fog: little Yulia's tears after eating too much on her third birthday; the faces of the men carrying out the search; clothes, technical drawings, dolls, and dishes strewn about the floor; the rubber plant, a wedding present from her mother, torn out of its pot; her husband's smile as he stood in the doorway for the last time, a pathetic, pleading smile, imploring her to remain loyal, a smile she could not remember without crying out and clasping her head in her hands; then mad weeks when everything went on just the same, little Yulia's saucepan of porridge coexisting with the glacial horror of the Lubyanka; the queues at the reception office of the internal prison, and a voice from the little window saying, "Your parcel is refused"; the scurrying around to see various relatives; learning their addresses by heart; the hurried, clumsy sale of a wardrobe with a mirror and a set of the fine volumes published by Academia; the pain she had felt when a bosom friend had stopped phoning her; more nighttime guests and a search that had gone on until dawn; saying goodbye to little Yulia, whom they had almost certainly taken to an orphanage rather than allowing her grandmother to take charge of her; a cell in the Butyrka where everyone spoke in whispers, and where matches and fish bones picked out of the gruel served as needles for doing one's mending; the colorful sight of dozens of handkerchiefs, knickers, and bras all being waved in the air to dry; a nighttime interrogation during which, for the first time in her life, a man shook his fist at her, addressing her as *Ty* and calling her a whore and a prostitute. She was charged with failing to denounce her husband, who, for his part, had been sentenced to "ten years without right of correspondence" for failing to denounce "terrorists."

Masha did not understand why she, and dozens like her, had been expected to denounce their husbands, why Andrey, and hundreds like him, had been expected to denounce their work colleagues and childhood friends. She was questioned by the investigator only once. This was followed by eight months of prison: day and night, night and day. Despair would give way to a dazed waiting for fate; now and again, as if by an ocean wave, she would be swept up by hope, by a certainty that she would soon see her husband and daughter.

Finally, the jailer handed her a thin slip of cigarette paper on which she read, "58–6–12."

Even after this she kept hoping. Her sentence would be repealed—yes, her husband had been acquitted, Yulia was already back at home, and soon they would meet, never to be separated again. The thought of this meeting made her turn hot and cold with joy.

She was woken in the middle of the night: "Lyubimova, with your belongings—quick!" She was taken in a Black Maria not to the Krasnopresenskaya transit prison but straight to the freight terminus for the Yaroslavl line, to be put on a prisoners' transport...

She remembered the morning after her husband's arrest with particular clarity, as if that morning were still continuing. The main door to the building had slammed shut; there had been the sound of a car driving away, then silence. Terror had entered her soul. The telephone was ringing in the corridor; the lift was suddenly stopping on their floor; a neighbor was shuffling out of the kitchen, and then her shuffling unexpectedly stopped.

She wiped the books scattered about the floor with a cloth and put them back on their shelves. She tied the linen lying on the floor into a bundle. Really she would have liked to boil it—everything in the room seemed to have been fouled. She put the rubber plant back into its pot and stroked one of its leathery leaves. Andryusha had made fun of this plant, saying it was a symbol of philistinism, and deep down she had agreed with him. Nevertheless, she had always defended it and never allowed her husband to move it out into the kitchen. She did not want to hurt her poor mother who, already an old woman, had carried it all the way across Moscow and had even had to drag it up to the fourth floor, since the lift had been under repair at the time.

Everything was silent. But their neighbors were not asleep. They pitied her, they were afraid of her, and they were overjoyed that no one had come to *their* room with search and arrest warrants...Little Yulenka was asleep, and she was tidying the room. Ordinarily she did not worry so much about tidiness. By and large she was indifferent to things; she had never cared about chandeliers or beautiful china. Some people saw her as slovenly, a bad housewife. But Andrey liked Masha's indifference to objects and the general disorder of their room. Now, though, she felt that if things regained their proper places, she would feel calmer and less oppressed.

She glanced in the mirror and looked around the room she had tidied. *Gulliver's Travels* was back where it had been yesterday, before the search. The rubber plant was back on its little table. And Yulia, who had been weeping and clinging to her mother until four in the morning, was asleep. It was quiet in the corridor; their

neighbors were not yet making a noise in the kitchen.

And in her now properly tidied little room Masha felt lacerated by despair. Her heart felt bright, glowing with love and tenderness for Andrey, but at the same time, in this domestic quiet, surrounded by familiar objects, she sensed as never before a merciless force that is capable of bending even the very axis of the earth. This force had attacked her; it had attacked Yulia and the little room about which she had said, “I don’t even want twenty square meters and a balcony, because I’m happy where I am.”

Yulia. Andryusha. She was being taken away from them. The clickety-clack of the wheels was drilling into her heart. She was moving ever farther from Yulia. Every hour was taking her closer to Siberia—to whatever had been given her in exchange for a life with those whom she loved.

Dear Mashenka was no longer wearing her check skirt. And the woman *thief* with the pale thin lips was combing her crackling, electric hair with Mashenka’s comb.

Only in the heart of a young woman can these two terrible torments live side by side: a mother’s desperate longing to save her helpless child—and a child’s helplessness before the fury of the State, a child’s wish to hide her face in her mother’s breast.

Her dirty, broken fingernails had once been manicured. Little Yulia had been intrigued by their color, and her father had once said to her, “Mummy’s fingernails are like the scales of a little fish.” There was no longer any trace of a wave in her hair. She had had her hair done a month before Andryusha’s arrest, when they were getting ready for the birthday party of the friend who no longer telephoned her.

Little Yulenka, dear shy, anxious little Yulenka—in an orphanage. Masha let out a quiet, plaintive groan and her eyes clouded over: How could she protect her little daughter from cruel orphanage attendants; from vicious children; from coarse, ragged orphanage clothing; from army blankets and prickly, straw-stuffed pillows? And the wagon kept creaking; there was no end to the clickety-clack of the wheels. Moscow and Yulia were ever farther away from her; Siberia was drawing closer and closer.

Good God, had her Moscow life ever really existed? But a moment later it was the present that seemed like a dream, like a nightmare: this stifling half dark, this aluminum bowl, the women *thieves* smoking their *makhorka* on the rough boards, her dirty underwear, her itching body, the anguish in her heart: “If only we stop soon—then at least the guards will protect us from the *thieves*!” And then, at each stop, the terror she felt as the guards cursed and waved the butts of their rifles about. All she could think was: “If only the train could get going again.” Even the thieves had said, “Those Vologda guards are worse than death.”

But Masha’s deepest pain had nothing to do with the creaking bedboards, or the frost that covered the walls the moment the stove went out, or even the brutality of the guards and the savagery of the *thieves.* Her deepest pain was that she was now emerging from the numbness that had cocooned her soul during her eight months in the prison cell.

This nine-thousand-kilometer descent into the deep grave of Siberia was something she sensed with her entire being.

There was no place in the transport for the senseless prison hope that the cell door would suddenly open and a guard would shout out, “Lyubimova, get your things! You’re free!” And that she would go out onto Novoslobodskaya Street, catch a bus home, and find Andrey and Yulia waiting for her there.

In a transport, there is neither the numbness of the prison cell nor the mindless exhaustion of the camps—only the ache of a battered heart.

And what if Yulia wet her knickers? Was she washing her hands? And her nose? Did it need blowing? And what about vegetables? She really needed her green vegetables. And she was always throwing off the bedclothes at night—often she ended up quite naked.

Mashenka was no longer wearing her own shoes; instead she had soldiers’ boots, one of which had a torn sole. Was this really her—Maria Konstantinovna, who used to read Blok, who had studied literature, who, without ever telling Andrey, had written poetry of her own? Masha, who used to rush to the Arbat to make an appointment with Ivan Afanasyevich, the hairdresser known as “Jean”? Masha, who had not only read books but who could also sew, make borsch, bake torte napoleon, and who had breast-fed a child? Masha, who had always been so full of admiration for Andrey, for his modesty and the energy he put into his work? Masha, who had won everyone’s admiration for her devotion to her husband and daughter? Masha, who knew how to weep, and who knew how to be witty, and who was good at looking after the pennies?

And the train continued on its way, and now Masha had the first stages of typhus. Her head felt clouded, dark, heavy. But no, it was not typhus, she was all right. And once again hope found a path to her heart. They would reach the camps, and someone would call out her name: “Lyubimova, step forward. There’s a telegram for you. You’re released.” And so on and so forth—and she would go by passenger train to Moscow...The city suburbs...Sofrino...Pushkino...The Yaroslavl station...And Andrey, holding Yulia in his arms.

And hope brought heartache. If only they could get to their destination sooner, if only she could get that telegram sooner...Yulia’s thin little legs were moving so quickly. The coach was slowing down now, and Yulia was running alongside it.

At last, after the *thieves* have stolen every last thing of hers, Masha gets off the train. Around her head she is wearing a dirty, shaggy towel, and she is hiding her freezing fingers in the sleeves of a greasy padded jacket. And squeaking glassily over the snow are the shoes of hundreds of Moscow women, all of them sentenced to ten years of hard labor for failing to denounce their own husbands.

Their legs are still in silk stockings; their high-heeled shoes keep stumbling. These women are envious of Masha. She traveled in a wagon with thieves and not with other wives. Her own clothes have all gone, but she has a padded jacket instead—and boots she can stuff with paper and rags to keep her feet warm.

These wives of enemies of the people stumble, hurry forward, fall to the ground. They quickly gather up their little bundles, which have scattered over the snow, but they are afraid to cry.

Masha looks around: behind her is the station shed, and a string of freight wagons that look like red beads against snow-white skin; in front of her slowly uncoils a long column of female prisoners, like a dark snake; all around are stacks of timber, powdered with snow. And there are the guards in their marvelously warm sheepskin coats—and the constantly barking guard dogs in their own warm, thick fur. The air, after two months in the transport, is intoxicatingly clean, but it feels sharper than a razor blade. The wind gets up; a dry, snowy cloud billows over the open ground, and the head of the column is lost in a white blur. The cold whips faces and legs. Masha's head whirls.

And all of a sudden, through her exhaustion, through the fear of getting frostbite and gangrene, through dreams of finding herself somewhere warm, of being taken to a bathhouse to wash, through her confusion at the sight of a portly old woman in pince-nez glasses lying on the snow with a strange, stupidly capricious look on her face—through all of this, and through the snowy mist, twenty-six-year-old Masha glimpsed her camp future. Far behind her, thousands of miles away, she could see her Moscow past, in a building on Spasopeskovsky Lane, a life now closed up and sealed. But here, emerging out of the mist were watchtowers, guards in full-length sheepskin overcoats, wide-open gates. At this moment Masha saw both of her lives with equal clarity: a fate that had gone, and a fate that had come.

She runs, stumbles, blows on her icy fingers. She is still gripped by the madness of hope. Soon she'll get to the camp—and they'll tell her about her release. She runs fast; she gets out of breath.

How hard she had to work. How her stomach hurt, how the small of her back ached from the incredible weight—far beyond what was acceptable for a woman—of the great chunks of lime. Even when they were empty, the handbarrows felt as if they were made of cast iron. Everything was heavy: the spades, the crowbars, the boards, the logs, the vats of dirty water, the latrine barrels full of excrement, the piles of dirty laundry that weighed tens of kilos.

How hard it was to walk to work in the darkness before dawn. How hard it was to endure the inspections, standing in the slush or in freezing cold. How she longed for the nauseating maize swill with a scrap of tripe or with fish scales that stick to the roof of your mouth. How pitilessly the *thieves* stole. What sordid conversations she heard at night on the bedboards. What horrible fumblings, whisperings, and rustlings. How eternally she longed for the stale, slightly graying black bread.

Sixteen-year-old Lena Rudolf, Masha's neighbor on the bedboards, began sleeping with Mukha, the criminal who looked after the boiler room. Lena caught syphilis from him. She lost her hair and her fingernails and was then transferred to a camp for the disabled. Lena's mother, the kind, obliging, blue-eyed Susanna Karlovna, somehow still remained as elegant as ever. Even though her hair was now gray, she still went on working, doing exercises every morning before dawn, and rubbing herself down with snow.

Masha worked every day until dark, like a mare, like a she-donkey or a she-camel. It was a strict-regime camp, and she did not have the right to send or receive letters. She did not know whether her husband was still alive or whether he had been executed. She knew nothing about her little Yulia. Had she ended up in an orphanage, or had she simply got lost like some small animal with no name? Perhaps her mother had, after all, managed to find Yulia? But was her mother still alive? Was her brother Volodya still alive? She seemed to have got used to knowing nothing about her nearest and dearest. She seemed to have stopped dreaming about receiving a letter. All she wanted, it seemed, was easier work, a job in the hospital or the kitchen—anything so as not to have to go out into the *taiga*, amid the terrible cold or the clouds of mosquitoes.

But her longing for her husband and daughter was as strong as ever, and her hope had not died; it only seemed to have died. Hope was sleeping. And to Masha her hope was like a little child asleep in her arms; when hope awakened, her heart filled with happiness, light, and grief.

One day she would see Yulia and her husband again. Not today, of course, and not tomorrow. The years would pass, but she would see them again. "Your hair's turned gray, Andrey...How sad your eyes look..." And Yulenka, dear little Yulenka. This pale, thin young woman was her daughter. But then came worrying thoughts: Would Yulia recognize her? Would she remember her, her camp mother? Or would she turn away from her?

Semisotov, one of the senior guards, forced her to sleep with him. He knocked out two of her teeth and struck her on the temple. This was during her first autumn in the camp. She tried to hang herself but failed; the rope was too weak. Some of the women, however, even felt envious. Then came a kind of pained indifference. Twice a week she dragged herself along, behind Semisotov, to a storeroom where there were bedboards covered with sheepskins. Semisotov was always sullen and silent and she would be out of her mind with fear. When he was drunk and furious, she would feel sick with terror. But once he gave her five candies and she thought, "If only I could send them to Yulia in her orphanage." Instead of eating them, she hid them in her little straw mattress. They were stolen. Once Semisotov said to her, "You're filthy, you slut. No peasant woman would ever let herself get so dirty." Surprisingly, he always addressed her as *Vy*, even when he was dead drunk. Semisotov's disgust gladdened her, but at the same time she thought, "If he ditches me, it'll be

back to carrying loads of quicklime."

One evening Semisotov left the barrack and never appeared again. She learned later that he had been transferred to another camp. And she was glad to be able to sit on the bedboards in the evening—glad not to have to follow him, hanging her head, to the storeroom. But then she was thrown out of the office building where, in the days of Semisotov, she had cleaned floors and kept the stoves going. She had nothing to offer by way of a bribe, and so her place was taken by the *thief* who had stolen her woolen cardigan in the transport. Masha was glad that Semisotov had gone, but she also felt hurt. He had not said even a word of goodbye to her; he had treated her worse than a dog. And she was a woman who had once had a Moscow residence permit. She and her husband and Yulia had had a room of their own. She had washed in a bathroom; she had eaten from a plate.

And her work was very hard during the winter months. And it was hard in summer, and in spring, and it was hard in autumn, and now she no longer remembered the Arbat or Andrey but only how, in the days of Semisotov, she had cleaned floors in the office building. Had she really been blessed with such good fortune?

Nevertheless, hope was still there, living its secret life inside her: they would all see each other again. By then, of course, she would be an old woman. Her hair would be quite gray, and Yulia would have children of her own—but they would see each other again. They simply couldn't not.

There were so many worries, so many things that needed attending to: a torn shirt; an outbreak of boils; a pain in her stomach—and she was refused permission to go to the doctor. One day the skin on her heels started tearing, and then she was limping, and her footcloths were black with blood. Then one of her felt boots was falling apart. Then she was desperate to wash herself and her things; she simply had to go to the bathhouse at once, even if it were only for a few minutes, without waiting for the day when it would be her turn. Then she had to find a way of drying her padded jacket, which had got soaked in the rains...And it was a struggle to get hold of every smallest thing: a tin of hot water; a length of darning thread; a needle she could rent; a spoon with an intact handle; a scrap of material to use as a patch. And how could she escape from the gnats? How could she protect her face and hands from the cold—a cold that was as vicious as the camp guards?

The prisoners' cursing and swearing, their fights and quarrels were no easier to bear than the work.

Life in the barrack went on.

Auntie Tanya, who had once lived in Oryol and worked as a cleaner, used to whisper, "Grief to those who live on this earth!" She had a coarse face, more like that of a man; it looked cruel and frenzied. But there was not the least hint of cruelty or frenzy in Auntie Tanya, nothing but kindness. Why had this saint been sent to the camp? With an incomprehensible meekness, she was always ready to help out, to take someone else's place washing floors or doing some other routine task in the barrack.

The two old nuns, Varvara and Ksenya, would exchange quick whispers the moment any sinner began to come near them. Then they would fall silent. They lived in a world apart. To sign any document was a sin; to utter their worldly name was a sin; to drink from the same mug as a woman of the world was a sin; to put on a camp jacket was a sin. They would die rather than do any of these things—so stubbornly did they cling to their holiness. Their holiness was visible in their clothes, in their white kerchiefs, in their pursed lips, but in their eyes there was only cold indifference—and contempt for the sins and sufferings of the camps. Their celibate souls were repelled by womanly passions and troubles, by the sufferings of mothers and wives; to them, all such things seemed unclean. What mattered was to preserve the cleanliness of your kerchief, of your cup, to purse your lips and keep your distance from the sinful life of the camp. The *thieves* hated them, and the "wives" disliked and avoided them too.

Wives, wives, wives, from Moscow and from Leningrad, from Kiev, Kharkov, and Rostov; sad women, down-to-earth women, and unworldly women; sinful, weak, meek, and spiteful women; women who laughed a lot; Russian and non-Russian women—and all of them wearing their camp jackets. The wives of doctors and engineers, of artists and agronomists; the wives of marshals of the Soviet Union and the wives of chemists; the wives of public prosecutors and of dispossessed small farmers; the wives of peasants who grew grain in Russia, the Ukraine, and Belorussia. All of them had been led by their husbands into the Scythian dark of the burial mounds known as camp barracks.

The more famous the "enemy of the people" who had perished, the wider the circle of women he dragged down: his wife, his ex-wife, his very first wife, his sisters, a secretary, a daughter, a close friend of his wife, a daughter from his first marriage.

Of some it was said, "She's surprisingly modest and unassuming." Of others: "Oh, she's quite unbearable. So high and mighty—anyone would think she was still in possession of all her Kremlin privileges!" The latter had their toadies and dependents even here. Over them hung an aura of power and doom. People repeated in a whisper, "No, you can be sure *they* won't get out of here alive."

There were old women with calm, tired eyes who had first been imprisoned way back in Lenin's day and who had served whole decades in the prisons and camps. Members of The People's Will, Social Democrats, and Socialist Revolutionaries. These women were treated with respect by the guards, and even by the *thieves.* They did not get up from the bedboards even if the camp superintendent himself came into the barrack. People said that one of them, Olga Nikolaevna, a little old woman with gray hair, had been an anarchist before the Revolution; she had thrown a bomb at the carriage of the governor of Warsaw and had fired a shot

at a police general. And now here she was—sitting on the bedboards, reading a book, and drinking a mug of hot water. One night Masha had come back from a visit to the storeroom with Semisotov and this old woman had come up to her, stroked her on the head, and said, “My poor girl!” How Masha had cried.

Susanna Karlovna Rudolf’s place on the bedboards was not far from Masha’s. She was still doing her exercises, still taking care always to breathe through her nose. Her Christian Socialist husband, a German American, had come to Soviet Russia with his family and taken Soviet citizenship. Professor Rudolf had been sentenced to “ten years without right of correspondence,” that is, he had been shot in the basement of the Lubyanka. Susanna Karlovna and her three daughters—Agnessa, Louisa, and Lena—had been sent to strict-regime labor camps. She knew nothing at all about her elder daughters, and it was now some time since Lena, the youngest, had been sent to the camp for the disabled. Susanna Karlovna no longer exchanged greetings with Olga Nikolaevna—not since Olga Nikolaevna had called Stalin a Fascist and Lenin the assassin of Russian freedom. Susanna Karlovna said that through her work she was helping to construct a new world and that this gave her the strength to endure the separation from her husband and daughters. When she was living in London, she had known H. G. Wells, and in Washington she had met President Roosevelt, who had enjoyed talking to her husband. She accepted everything; she understood everything. There was only one thing she did not quite understand: the man who had come to arrest her husband had pocketed a large and very rare gold coin; it was almost the size of a child’s hand and it was worth a hundred dollars. On it was a silhouette of a Red Indian with feathered headgear. The officer must, she thought, have taken it for his little son, not even realizing it was gold...

All of them—the pure and the fallen, the most robust and the most exhausted—lived in a world of hope. Hope sometimes slept, sometimes awoke, but it never left them.

Masha too had hope. Hope tormented her; but even as it tormented her, hope made it possible for her to breathe.

The Siberian winter, itself almost as long as a term in camp, was followed by a pale spring. Masha and two other women were sent to clear the road to the “socialist settlement” where the camp bosses and the free employees lived in log cottages.

What she saw from a distance was the silhouette of a rubber plant and her own Arbat curtains on the high windows. She saw a little girl with a school satchel climb up onto the porch and enter the house belonging to the officer in charge of the administration of the strict-regime labor camps.

Their guard said, “What d’you think you’re here for—to watch a movie?”

And on their way back in the last of the evening light, as they passed the timber store, they suddenly heard the sound of Radio Magadan.

Masha and the two other women dragging themselves along through the spring mud put their spades down and stopped.

Silhouetted against the pale sky were the camp watchtowers. The guards in their black coats were like huge motionless flies. As for the squat barracks, it was as if they had just come out of the earth and were now thinking better of it, wondering if they should sink down into it again.

It was not sad music but merry; it was dance music. Listening to it, Masha wept as she seemed never to have wept in all her life. And the two other women—one of them a kulak who had been deported during total collectivization, the other an elderly woman from Leningrad, wearing glasses with cracked lenses—wept beside her. Somehow it looked as if the cracks in the Leningrad woman’s glasses had been made by her tears.

The guard did not know what to do. It was only very rarely that the *zeks* wept; their hearts were like the tundra—gripped by permanent frost.

The guard kept prodding the women in the back and begging, “All right now, that’s enough now, you shits...I’m asking you politely, you whores...”

He kept looking around for something. It never entered his head that the women might be weeping because of the music.

Nor did Masha herself understand why her heart was suddenly overflowing with anguish and despair. It was as if everything that had ever happened had become one: her mother’s love; beautiful poems; the check woolen dress that so suited her; Andryusha; the grubby face of the interrogator; dawn over the suddenly gleaming light-blue sea at Kelasuri, not far from Sukhumi; little Yulenka’s chatter; Semisotov; the old nuns; the furious quarrels of the bull dykes; her anguish because her brigade leader had begun looking very intently at her, narrowing her eyes, just as Semisotov had done. Why had this merry dance music made Masha sense so acutely her filthy undershirt, the sour smell of her jacket, her damp boots that were as heavy as irons? Why, all of a sudden, this question that had cut like a razor blade through her heart: Why, why had all this happened to her? Why this terrible cold, this moral degradation, this new submissiveness to her camp fate?

And hope, which until then had always oppressed her heart with its living weight, now died.

As she listened to this merry dance music, Masha’s hope of seeing Yulia died. Yulia was lost forever in the great network of children’s centers and orphanages; she was lost in the vastness of the Union of Socialist Soviet Republics. In student hostels and clubs young people were dancing to merry music like this...And Masha understood that her husband was no more; he had been shot, and she would never see him again.

And she was left without hope, entirely alone...Never would she see Yulia—neither today, nor in the future, when she was an old woman with gray hair.

Lord, Lord, have pity on her. Pity her, Lord. Have mercy upon her.

A year later Masha left the camp. Before returning to freedom, she lay for a while on some pine planks in a freezing hut. No one tried to hurry her out to work, and no one abused her. The medical orderlies placed Masha Lyubimova in a rectangular box made from boards that the timber inspectors had rejected for any other use. This was the last time anyone looked at her face. On it was a sweet, childish expression of delight and confusion, the same look as when she had stood by the timber store and listened to the merry music, first with joy and then with the realization that all hope had gone.

And Ivan Grigoryevich thought that in the camps, in the labor camps of Kolyma, men were not equal to women. Men, really, had had it easier.

In a dream Ivan Grigoryevich saw his mother. She was walking down a road, keeping to one side, out of the way of a long line of tractors and dump trucks. She did not see her son. He was shouting, “Mama, Mama, Mama,” but the heavy roar of the tractors drowned out his voice.

He had no doubt that she would recognize him. For all the chaos on the road, she would see that this old graybeard from the camps was her son—if only she could hear him, if only she would look around. But she did not hear him; she did not look around.

He opened his eyes in despair. Bending over him was a woman, half dressed. He had called out to his mother in a dream, and this woman had come to him.

She was there beside him. He felt at once, with all his being, that she was beautiful. She had heard him cry out in his sleep and she had come to him, feeling tenderness and pity toward him. The woman’s eyes were not weeping, but in them he could see something more important than tears of compassion. He saw something he had never before seen in the eyes of anyone.

She was beautiful because she was kind. He took her hand. She lay down beside him and he sensed her warmth, her tender breasts, her shoulders, her hair. It was as if he were sensing all this in his sleep; never, while awake, had he felt happy.

She was kindness, all kindness, and he understood with the whole of his corporal being that her tenderness, her warmth, her whispers were beautiful because her heart was full of kindness toward him, because love is kindness.

A first night of love...

“I don’t want to remember it—it’s too painful—but it’s impossible to forget it. It’s all still there. Asleep or not, it’s still living. A piece of iron in my heart, like a shell fragment. Something you can never get away from. How could I forget? I was already grown up.

“Darling, I loved my husband very much. I was beautiful, but I wasn’t a good person. I wasn’t kind. I was twenty-two. You wouldn’t have loved me then, even if I was beautiful. I know, I can feel it as a woman. I know I’m more to you than just this, than the two of us lying here together. As for me—don’t be angry if I say I look on you as Christ. I keep wanting to confess—to repent before you, as if before God. My good one, my desired one, I want to tell you about it. I want to recall everything that happened.

“No, there was no famine at the time of the dispossession of the kulaks. All that happened then was that some of the land went out of cultivation, that’s all. The famine began in 1932, well over a year after what we called ‘dekulakization.’

“I worked as a cleaner in the building of the district executive committee; I used to wash the floors. A friend of mine used to wash the floors in the land office. We heard a great deal. I can tell you everything, everything that happened. The accountant used to tell me I should have been a government minister. It’s true—I understand things quickly, and I’ve got a good memory.

“Dekulakization began in late 1929, and the campaign was at its fiercest in February and March 1930.

“First of all, before there were any arrests, the kulaks were asked to pay a special tax. They paid up; somehow they found the money. Then they were taxed a second time. Anything they could, they sold. They believed that, if they paid up, the State would be merciful. There were some, though, who made vodka out of their grain and slaughtered their cattle. They felt there was nothing left in their lives, so they just ate and drank.

“In other provinces things may have been different, but this is how it went in our province. At first it was only the heads of families who were arrested. Most of the men they took had fought for the Whites, in Denikin’s Cossack units. This first wave of arrests was carried out by the OGPU; the Party activists played no part at all. And everyone arrested was shot—to the last man. Those who were arrested in late December, however, were kept in prison for two or three months and then sent to special settlements. When it was a father who was arrested, the rest of the family were left alone, except that an inventory was made of all their property; the family was no longer considered to own the property but merely to have been entrusted with it for safekeeping.

“The provincial Party committee would draw up a plan—that is, the total number of arrests to be made—and send it to each district Party committee. The district committees would then decide on the number of kulaks to be arrested in each village—and the village soviets would then each draw up a list of names. It was on the basis of these lists that people were arrested. And who drew up the lists? A group of three—a *troika.* A group of three ordinary, muddle-headed people determined who was to live and who was to die. There were no holds barred. There were bribes...There were scores to be settled because of a woman, or because of some other past grievance...Often it was the poorest peasants who were listed as kulaks, while the richer peasants managed to buy themselves off.

“I can see now, though, that it’s not simply a matter of the lists having been drawn up by the wrong people. There were, in any case, more honest, sincere people among the activists than there were scoundrels. But the evil committed by the honest people was no less than the evil committed by the bad people. What matters is

that the very existence of these lists was unjust and evil. Precisely who was included in them is hardly the point. Ivan was innocent—and Pyotr was no less innocent. Who was it that established the total figure, the number of arrests for the whole country? Who drew up the grand plan? Who signed it?

"The fathers were already in prison, and then, at the beginning of 1930, the authorities began to round up the families too. This was more than the OGPU could do on its own, and so the Party activists were mobilized too. The activists were just villagers like anyone else, they were people everyone knew, but they all seemed to lose their minds. They seemed dazed, crazed, as if they'd fallen under some spell. They threatened people with guns. They called small children 'kulak brats.' 'You're bloodsuckers!' they yelled, 'bloodsuckers!' And the 'bloodsuckers' were white as sheets—they hardly had a drop of blood left in their veins. As for the activists, their eyes were like glass; they were like the eyes of cats. And yet, for the main part, they were people from our own village. They were, admittedly, under a spell. They'd convinced themselves that the kulaks were evil, that it was best not even to touch them. They would not even sit down to eat with one of 'those parasites.' The kulaks' towels were unclean, their children were disgusting, their young women were worse than lice. The activists looked on those who were being dispossessed as if they were cattle, or swine. Everything about the kulaks was vile—they were vile in themselves, and they had no souls, and they stank, and they were full of sexual diseases, and worst of all, they were enemies of the people and exploiters of the labor of others. The poor, the Komsomol, and the police—they were all Chapaevs, every one of them was a hero. In reality, though, you only had to look at these activists and it was obvious they were just people like any other people—some were green and inexperienced, and a fair number of them were just plain scoundrels.

"All these words had their effect on me too. I was only a girl—and during meetings and special briefings, from films, books, articles, and radio broadcasts, from Stalin himself, I kept hearing one and the same thing: that kulaks are parasites, that kulaks burn bread and murder children. The fury of the masses had to be ignited against them—yes, those were the words; it was proclaimed that the kulaks must be destroyed as a class, every accursed one of them...I too began to fall under this spell. It seemed that every misfortune was because of the kulaks; if we were to annihilate them immediately, then happy days would dawn for us all. No mercy was to be shown to the kulaks. They were not even human beings; goodness knows what they were—some kind of beasts, I suppose. And so I became an activist. And there were all sorts among us activists. There were those who truly believed, who hated the 'parasites' and who really did do all they could for the poorest peasants; there were those with selfish aims of their own; and then there were those—the majority—who were simply obeying orders, people willing to beat their own mothers and fathers to death if that was what they were told to do. The most terrible of all were not those who believed in the happy life that would set in after the kulaks were all done away with—no, the beasts that seem wildest are not always the most dangerous. The most terrible of all were the ones with selfish aims of their own. They never stopped talking about political awareness—and all the time they were settling personal scores, stealing and plundering, destroying the lives of others. They destroyed others just to get hold of a few possessions, for a mere pair of boots. It was so easy to destroy: just write a denunciation—you don't even need to put your signature to it. Just say that your neighbor owned three cows, or that he had hired hands working for him—and there, you've set him up as a kulak. I saw what was happening and I was, of course, upset—but it didn't affect me deep down. It was the same as if farmyard cattle were being slaughtered in the wrong way—that too would have upset me, but I wouldn't have lost sleep over it.

"Don't you remember how you once answered a question of mine? Me—I shall never forget your words. Those words of yours opened my eyes; they brought me the light of day. I asked you how the Germans could send Jewish children to die in the gas chambers: How, I asked, could they live with themselves after that? Could there really be no judgment on them either from man or God? And you said, Only one judgment is passed on the executioner—from looking at his victim as other than human, he ceases to be human himself. He executes the human being inside his own self; he is his own executioner. But—no matter how hard the executioner tries to kill him—his victim remains a human being forever. Remember now?

"I understand now why I chose to become a cook, why I didn't want to go on being the chairman of a collective farm. But I've told you about that already.

"When I look back now, I see the liquidation of the kulaks very differently. I'm no longer under a spell. I can see now that the kulaks were human beings. But why was my heart so frozen at the time? When such terrible things were being done, when such suffering was going on all around me? And the truth is that I truly didn't think of them as human beings. 'They're not human beings, they're kulak trash!'—that's what I heard again and again, that's what everyone kept repeating. And when I think about it all now, I wonder who first talked about kulak trash. Lenin? Was it really Lenin? How the kulaks suffered. In order to kill them, it was necessary to declare that kulaks are not human beings. Just as the Germans said that Yids are not human beings. That's what Lenin and Stalin said too: The kulaks are not human beings. But that's a lie. They are people. They are human beings. I can see now that we are all human beings.

"And so, at the beginning of 1930 they began dispossessing the families of the kulaks. The campaign was at its most frenzied in February and March. The district committee was hurrying everything on. They wanted every kulak out before the spring sowing. Then a new life would begin. We kept talking about our 'first collective-farm spring.'

"The activist committees, of course, were in charge of the expulsions. But they had been given no detailed

instructions. Some collective-farm chairmen gathered together so many carts that no one knew what to do with them. The 'grasping kulaks' didn't have enough possessions to fill them, so they went off in half-empty carts. The kulaks from our village, on the other hand, were sent out on foot. They took only what they could carry on their own backs—blankets and clothing. The mud was so deep it kept sucking their boots off their feet. It was a terrible sight. There was a whole column of them and they kept looking around at their huts. They must still have been filled with the warmth from their own stoves. Heaven knows what they were going through. It was in those huts that they had been born. It was from those huts that they had given their daughters away in marriage. Their stoves were still burning—they had had to leave cabbage soup that was still only half cooked, milk that they hadn't had time to drink. There was smoke coming out of their chimneys. The women were weeping, but they were too scared to howl. And what did we care? We were—activists. We could just as well have been driving a flock of geese down the road. And on a cart following behind them were Pelageya the blind woman, old Dmitry Ivanovich who hadn't been out of his hut for ten years because of his legs, and Marusya the Fool, who had been kicked on the temple by a horse when she was still a child and who had been in a daze ever since.

"And in the district center there was no room in the prison. You couldn't really call it a prison at all—just a lockup. And there were whole armies of kulaks—a column from every village. The cinema, the theater, the clubs, and the schools—all of them were turned into prisons. But people weren't kept there for long. Soon they were taken to the station, where trains of empty freight wagons were waiting in the sidings. They were taken there under guard—grandfathers and grandmothers, women and children, all escorted by the police and the OGPU as if they were murderers. There were no fathers—the fathers, remember, had all been arrested a few months before. People whispered, 'There go the kulaks.' It was as if they were talking about wolves. Some people even shouted out curses at them—but the prisoners were no longer weeping, their faces were like stone...

"I myself didn't see them being taken away in trains, but other people have told me what happened. Later, trying to escape the famine, there were fellow villagers who managed to join the kulaks in their settlements beyond the Urals. And a close friend sent me a letter. And there were people who escaped from their special settlements. I talked to two of them myself.

"They were transported in sealed freight wagons. Their belongings went separately. All they could take with them was the food they had in their hands. And at one station the fathers were all put on the train. That day there was great joy in the freight wagons, and great tears. The journey lasted more than a month—peasants were being taken from all over Russia and the railway lines were jammed with transport trains. There were no bed-boards in the cattle wagons. Everyone just slept on the floor, packed together. The sick, of course, died before they reached their destination. But still, people did at least get fed. At each of the main stations there were pails of gruel, and two hundred grams of bread per head.

"The guards were ordinary soldiers, not OGPU. They weren't vicious—they simply treated the peasants like they were cattle. So my friend wrote in her letter.

"And I've heard what it was like when they finally got there, I heard from those who got away. Everyone was simply scattered about the *taiga*. If you were old or sick, if you couldn't work, you were dropped off in a village in the forest. The village huts ended up as crowded as the cattle wagons had been. And everyone else was just put down in the middle of nowhere; they were left to fend for themselves on the snow. The weak froze to death. Those who were able to work began cutting down trees. They left the stumps where they were, pulled the trunks along the ground, and began building makeshift shelters. They worked without a break, almost without sleeping, so that their families wouldn't freeze to death. Only later did they have time to build proper log huts—two-room huts, one family in each room. They built those huts straight on the moss, and they filled in the gaps between the logs with moss.

"Those who were fit for work were bought from the OGPU by State logging enterprises. The logging enterprises supplied them with all they needed for work, and with rations for their dependents. The huts they'd built were called a 'labor settlement,' and everything was supervised by a 'commandant' and by 'foremen.' They were paid, apparently, the same as local workers, though all their pay went into special books. Our people are strong, and soon they began to earn more than the locals. But they had to stay within bounds—either in the settlement itself or in the logging area. Later on, I heard, during the War, they were allowed to travel within the region. And after the War, heroes of labor could go outside the region. Some even received internal passports.

"As for those considered unfit for work, my friend said that they were formed into 'labor colonies.' These were supposed to be self-sufficient—they were just lent some seed and supplied with rations to keep people going until the first harvest. Otherwise the 'colonies' were much the same as the settlements—supervised by guards and a commandant. Later they were turned into cooperatives. There was still a commandant, but the peasants also had their own representatives.

"Meanwhile, back in the village, our new life began. Now that there were no more kulaks, everyone was forced to join the collective farm. There were meetings that lasted all night long—with endless cursing and shouting. Some people were refusing to join; others said that they didn't mind joining but that they weren't going to give up their cows. Then came Stalin's article in *Pravda*, 'Dizziness from Success.' Once again there was chaos. 'But you can't force us to join,' people protested. 'Stalin says so himself.' People began writing

declarations on scraps of newspaper, ‘I am leaving the collective to become an independent farmer.’ But after a while the authorities began forcing everyone to rejoin the collectives. As for the property left by the kulaks, most of it simply got stolen.

“And we all thought that no fate could be worse than that of the kulaks. How wrong we were. In the villages the ax fell on everyone—no one was big enough, or small enough, to be safe.

“This time it was execution by famine.

“By then I was a bookkeeper; I had moved on from washing floors. As an activist, I was sent to the Ukraine to ‘reinforce’ a collective farm. The spirit of private property, we were told, was more powerful there than in Russia. That’s as may be—but it’s certainly true that they were having a hard time of it, even harder than we were. I wasn’t sent far. Our own village was right on the border with the Ukraine, and this collective farm was less than three hours away. It was a beautiful place. And the people there were like people anywhere else. And so I became their bookkeeper.

“I think I learned about everything that was done there. It’s really not for nothing that that old man said I should have been a government minister. I only say this because I’m telling you everything—I’m not in the habit of boasting about myself. I could have kept all the accounts without even using paper—it was all there in my head. And when we had training sessions, when our *troika* had meetings or our bosses got drunk, I took in everything that was said.

“How did it all happen? After the dispossession of the kulaks, the area of land under cultivation dropped sharply, and so did the crop yield. But everyone kept reporting that without the kulaks, our life had immediately started to blossom. The village soviet lied to the district, the district to the province, and the province to Moscow. Everyone wanted Stalin to rejoice in the belief that a happy life had begun and the whole of his dominion would soon be awash with collective-farm grain. The time came for the first collective-farm harvest. Everything seemed in order. Moscow determined the quotas for grain deliveries from each province, and the provinces determined the quota for each district. And our village was given a quota it couldn’t have fulfilled in ten years. All the members of the village soviet were terrified; even the teetotalers took to drink. It was clear that Moscow had put all its hopes on the Ukraine. And so it was the Ukraine, above all, that then got the blame. Everyone understood very well: if you fail to fulfill the plan, you’re a kulak yourself—and you should have been liquidated long ago.

“It was, of course, impossible to fulfill the plan. The area under cultivation was down, and so were yields. Where was it then—this ocean of collective-farm grain? It must have been hidden away! Idlers, parasites, kulaks who had not yet been liquidated! The kulaks had been deported, but their spirit endured. The Ukrainian peasant was in thrall to private property.

“Who signed the decree? Who ordered the mass murder? Was it really Stalin? I often ask myself. Never, I believe, in all Russian history, has there been such a decree. No tsar, nor even the Tatars or German Fascists, ever signed such a decree. The decree meant the death by famine of the peasants of the Ukraine, the Don, and the Kuban. It meant the death of them and their children. Even their entire seed fund was to be confiscated. The authorities searched for that grain as if they were searching for bombs and machine guns. They stabbed the earth with bayonets and ramrods; they smashed floors and dug underneath them; they dug up vegetable gardens. Sometimes they requisitioned the grain inside people’s huts, the grain people had put in pots and tubs. One woman had some bread requisitioned, loaves that had already been baked. It too was loaded onto the cart and taken off to the district center.

“Day and night the carts creaked along, clouds of dust hung over the earth—but there were no silos to keep all this grain in. The grain was simply dumped on the ground, with sentries standing guard all around it. By the beginning of winter the grain was soaking and beginning to rot. The Soviet authorities did not have enough tarpaulins to protect the peasants’ grain.

“And while they were still transporting the grain, there was dust wherever you went. It was like clouds of smoke—over the village, over the fields, over the face of the moon at night. I remember one man going out of his mind. ‘We’re on fire!’ he kept screaming. ‘The sky is burning! The earth is burning!’ No, it was not the sky—it was life itself that was burning.

“That was when I understood: what mattered to the Soviet authorities was the plan. Fulfill the plan! Deliver your assigned quota of grain. The State comes first, and people are just one big zero.

“Mothers and fathers wanted to save their children, to put just a little grain to one side. They were told, ‘You hate the motherland of socialism with a ferocious hatred. You want to sabotage the plan. You’re nothing but vermin, you subkulak parasites.’ But they didn’t want to sabotage the plan—they wanted to save their children, to save themselves. Everyone, after all, needs to eat.

“I can tell you the story, but a story is only words—and this was a matter of life and death, of torment, of people dying from starvation. When the grain was requisitioned, by the way, the Party activists were told that the peasants would be fed by the State. That was a lie. Not a single grain was given to the hungry.

“Who confiscated the grain? For the main part, it was local people: from the district executive committee and from the district Party committee; young lads from the Komsomol, locals all of them; the police, of course; and the OGPU. In a few places they even used army units. I only saw one man from Moscow. He’d been mobilized to the Ukraine by the Party, but he didn’t seem very eager. He kept trying to go back home...Once again, though, the same as during collectivization, people became dazed, crazed, like wild beasts.

“Grisha Saenko was a policeman. He was married to a local girl, and on holidays he used to come to the village and go to parties. He was someone bright and lively. He could dance the tango and the waltz, and he knew all the songs from the Ukrainian villages. One day an old man, a real graybeard, went up to him and said, ‘Grisha, you’re ruining all of us. What you’re doing is worse than murder. Why does a Workers’ and Peasants’ State treat the peasantry worse than the tsars did?’ Grisha pushed his hand in the old man’s face and then went off to the well to wash, saying, ‘How can I pick up a spoon with a hand that’s just touched the filthy mug of that parasite?’

“And the dust. Day and night, while they were taking the grain, there was dust. And at night the moon hung there like a stone, taking up half the sky. And everything beneath that moon seemed strange and wild. And it was so hot at night—like under a sheepskin. And fields that had been trampled, trampled, and trampled again...Just to look at them was like reading a death sentence.

“People began to lose their minds. The cattle kept lowing plaintively—they were becoming timid, frightened of people. The dogs were howling all night. And the earth began to crack from the heat.

“Then came autumn, and autumn rains. And then a snowy winter. And there was no bread.

“There was no bread for sale in the district center—it was only for those who had ration cards. Nor could you buy it at a railway-station kiosk—there were armed guards who didn’t let you anywhere near the station without special permission. You couldn’t buy bread anywhere, at any price.

“During the autumn people took to living on potatoes—but without bread, it doesn’t take long to get through potatoes. Toward Christmas they began slaughtering their cattle—but the cattle were nothing, just skin and bones. They slaughtered the chickens, of course. Soon they’d got through all their meat. And there wasn’t so much as a drop of milk to be found in the village. Nor was there a single egg. And worst of all, there was no grain, no bread. Every last kernel had been requisitioned. Come spring, there would be no spring wheat to sow, the entire seed fund had gone. People’s only hope was the winter wheat, but that was still under the snow. There was no sign of spring, and the village was already beginning to starve. They’d eaten all the meat. They’d eaten what millet they had. They were getting to the end of their stock of potatoes—the larger families already had none left at all.

“People began begging for loans of grain. From the village soviet, from the district committee. They didn’t get a word in answer. And it was nineteen kilometers to the district center, and there were no horses.

“It was terrible. Mothers looked at their own children—and screamed in fear. It was as if they’d seen a snake in the house. And they had seen a snake; they had seen famine, starvation, death. What could they do? No one in the village could think of anything except food. People would suck and move their jaws up and down. The saliva would flow, and they’d swallow it down—but you need more than saliva to fill up your stomach. If you woke in the night, there wasn’t a sound to be heard. No one talking anywhere, no one playing an accordion. The silence of the grave. No footsteps but the footsteps of famine—famine never slept. First thing in the morning, the children were crying in every hut, asking for bread. And what were their mothers to give them? Snow? There was no help to be had from anyone. The Party officials just went on repeating, ‘You shouldn’t have lazed about like that. You should have worked harder.’ Sometimes they added, ‘Just look around you. There’s enough grain been buried here for the next three years!’

“Still, there was no real famine that winter. People became weak, of course. Their stomachs began to bulge from eating just scraps and peelings, but there was no real dropsy. They began digging up acorns from under the snow. They dried them; the miller set his stones farther apart—and he ground them up into flour. People began making bread—flatbreads, really—from acorns. Some people added bran, or ground-up potato peelings. But the acorns didn’t last long—it was only a small oak wood and three whole villages had descended on it at once. Meanwhile a Party official came from the city and said to us in the village soviet, ‘See what those parasites are like! Digging for acorns! Digging under the snow with their bare hands! Anything to get out of work!’

“The senior classes carried on going to school almost until it was spring, but the junior classes stopped during the winter. And in spring the school closed and the teacher went off to the city. The medical assistant left too; there was nothing for him to eat. And there are no medicines against hunger. The village was left to look after itself—with everyone starving in their huts, and nothing but desert on all sides. And all the various officials from the city stopped coming. There was nothing more to be taken from the starving people—so why should anyone go to the village? There was nothing a teacher could teach them—and nothing a medical assistant could do. Once the State’s squeezed all it can out of you, then you’re no more use to it. No point in teaching or healing you.

“The villagers were left on their own; the State withdrew from them. People began wandering from house to house, begging from one another. Poor begged from poor; the starving from the starving. People with large families begged from people with small families, and from those who had no children at all. They still had something left at the beginning of spring, and sometimes they gave away a handful of bran or a couple of potatoes. But the Party members never gave anyone anything at all—not because they were especially greedy, or especially bad, but simply because they were frightened. And the State didn’t give the starving so much as one grain of wheat—even though the grain grown by the peasants was its very foundation. Did Stalin know all this? The old people talked about the famine at the time of the tsar. Then there had been help. They had been given loans. The peasants had gone to the cities; they’d begged for alms ‘in the name of Christ.’ Soup kitchens

had been opened, and students had collected donations. But under a workers' and peasants' government no one had given them a single grain. And there were roadblocks—manned by soldiers, police, and OGPU—on every road. The starving had to stay in their villages—they were not to walk to the cities. There were guards around every railway station, even around the smallest halts. For those who fed the nation there was no bread. And in the cities the workers were receiving eight hundred grams of bread a day on their ration cards. Eight hundred grams! Good God, it was unimaginable. And not a gram for the peasant children in the villages. It was the same as the Nazis putting Jewish children in the gas chambers: 'You're Yids—you've no right to live.' But what we did was beyond all understanding: it was the Soviet people against the Soviet people, Russians against Russians. It was a government of workers and peasants. Why all this killing?

"It was when the snow began to melt that the real hunger began.

"The children were crying. They no longer slept; they were asking for bread even at night. People's faces were ashen; their eyes were clouded, as if drunk. They walked about as if half asleep, keeping one hand against the wall and moving one foot at a time, testing the ground with it. Hunger shakes people. People began to move about less and to spend more and more time lying down. And they kept imagining they could hear the sound of a cart: flour, sent by Stalin from the district center, to save their children.

"The women turned out to be stronger, more stubborn, than the men; they kept a tighter hold on life. But they also had more to endure—it's their mothers, after all, whom children turn to for food. Some women tried to reason with their children. They would kiss them and say, 'Don't cry. Be patient. There just isn't anything.' Others went almost out of their minds. 'Stop that whining,' they'd shout, 'or I'll kill you!' And they'd lay into their children with whatever was at hand—anything to stop their pleading. Some escaped from their houses and sat with their neighbors so as not to hear their children crying.

"By this time there were no dogs or cats left. They had all been slaughtered. Not that it had been easy to catch them. They were afraid of people by then, and they looked at them with wild eyes. People boiled the animals, but there was nothing except dry tendons. They made a kind of meat jelly out of their heads.

"So the snow melted and people began to swell up. It was the dropsy of starvation. They had swollen faces and legs like pillows. Their stomachs were full of water and they were constantly peeing. They kept having to go outside. As for the children—did you see the newspaper photographs of children from the German camps? They looked just the same: heads heavy as cannonballs; thin little necks, like the necks of storks; and on their arms and legs you could see every little bone. Every single little bone moving under their skin, and the joints between them. And draped over their skeletons was a kind of yellow gauze. And the children's faces looked old and tormented—it was as if they'd been on this earth for seventy years. By the spring they no longer had faces at all. Some had the heads of birds, with a little beak; some had the heads of frogs, with thin wide lips; some looked like little gudgeons, with wide-open mouths. Nonhuman faces. And their eyes! Dear God! Comrade Stalin, by God, did you see those eyes? Perhaps he truly did not know. It was he, after all, who wrote that article, the one about dizziness from success.

"There was nothing people didn't eat. They caught mice; they caught rats, jackdaws, sparrows, and ants; they dug up earthworms. They ground up old bones to make flour. They cut up leather, the soles of shoes, stinking old animal hides to make something like noodles; then they boiled the noodles up to make a kind of gummy paste. When plants and grasses began to sprout, they started digging up roots and boiling leaves and buds. There was nothing they didn't use: dandelions, burdock, bluebells, willow herb, goutweed, cow parsnip, nettles, stonecrop...They dried linden leaves and ground them into flour, but we only had a few lindens. The flatbreads made from linden leaves were green, worse than the ones made from acorns.

"And still no help. Not that anyone was asking for it any longer. Even now, when I start to think of it all, I feel I'm losing my mind. Did Stalin really turn his back on all these people? Did he really carry out such a massacre? Stalin had food; Stalin had bread. It seems that he chose to kill all these people, that he starved them deliberately. They didn't even help the children. So was Stalin, then, worse than Herod? Did he really take away people's last kernels of grain—and then starve them? 'No,' I say to myself, 'how could he?' But then I say to myself, 'It happened, it happened.' And then, immediately: 'No, it couldn't have!'

"While they still had a little strength, people used to walk through the fields to the railway. Not to the station—no, the guards didn't let them anywhere near it—but just to the track itself. When the Kiev–Odessa express came by, they used to kneel down and shout, 'Bread! Bread!' Sometimes they held their children up in the air—their terrible children. And sometimes people would throw them pieces of bread or some scraps. The dust would settle, the rumble of the train would pass—and the whole village would be crawling along the track, searching for crusts. But then came new regulations; when trains were going through the famine provinces, the OGPU guards had to close the windows and lower the blinds. Passengers weren't allowed to look out. And the peasants stopped going to the railway anyway. They no longer had the strength to go outside their huts, let alone as far as the railway.

"I remember how one old man showed the farm chairman a piece of newspaper he'd picked up by the railway. There was an item about some Frenchman, a famous minister, who'd come to the Soviet Union. He was taken to the Dnepropetrovsk Province, where the famine was at its most terrible, even worse than where we were. People were eating people there. He was taken to some village, to a collective-farm nursery school, and he asked the children what they'd had for lunch that day. 'Chicken soup with pies and rice croquettes,' came the answer. I saw those words with my own eyes, I can see that piece of newspaper even now. There's

never been anything like it. Killing millions of people on the quiet and then duping the whole world. Chicken soup! Rice croquettes! Where we were, every last worm had been eaten. And the old man went on, 'Under Tsar Nicholas our newspapers told the whole world about the famine. "Help us, help us!" they wrote. "Our peasants are dying." But you monsters, you Herods—you just turn it all into one big show!'

"From the village came a howl; it had seen its own death. The whole village was howling, without mind, without heart. It was a noise like leaves in the wind, or creaking straw. It made me angry. Why did they have to howl so pitifully? They had ceased to be human—so why were they crying so pitifully? You'd have to be made of stone to carry on eating your ration of bread to the sound of that howling. I used to go out into the fields with my bread ration; I'd stop—and I could still hear them howling. I'd go a bit farther—and it would seem they'd gone silent. Then I'd go farther still—and I could hear it again. Only by then it was from the next village along. It would seem as if, along with the people, the whole earth had begun to howl. 'Who's going to hear them?' I'd think. 'There's no God.'

"An OGPU officer once said to me, 'You know what your villages are called by people at provincial headquarters? Cemeteries of the hard school!' But at first I didn't understand what he meant. And the weather was wonderful. We had quick, light showers early that summer, alternating with a hot sun. The wheat stood thick as a wall, taller than a man—as if you'd need an ax in order to cut it! I saw any numbers of rainbows that summer, and thunderstorms, and warm 'gypsy' rain, as they call it.

"All winter long everyone had been wondering about the harvest, searching for omens and questioning the old men. The winter wheat had been their only hope. And it proved everything they'd hoped for—but they were too weak to harvest it. I went into one hut. Everyone was lying down, barely breathing, or maybe not breathing at all, it was hard to tell. Some were on beds, some on the stove. The daughter—a girl I knew—was lying on the floor in a kind of madness, gnawing the leg of a stool. And what was worst of all is that she just growled when I came in. She didn't look around when she heard me. She just growled, the way a dog growls if you go too close when he's gnawing a bone.

"The whole village died. First it was the children that died, then it was the old people, then it was the middle-aged. At first people dug graves for them, but then they stopped. And so the dead were lying on the streets, in the yards, and the last to die just remained in their huts. It went quiet. The whole village had died. Who was the last to die, I don't know. Those of us who worked in the administration were taken off to the town.

"I ended up in Kiev. This was the time when bread came back on sale again. Even without a ration card, you could buy bread. You should have seen it. People began queuing the evening before—and even then the queues were half a mile long. There are many kinds of queues, you know: queues where people make jokes and crunch sunflower seeds; queues where your number is written down on a piece of paper; and queues where no one is joking and your number is written on the palm of your hand or chalked on your back. But these queues weren't like any of these; no, I've never seen anything like them. People put their arms around the waist of the person in front and clung up against them. If anyone stumbled, the whole queue would sway; it was as if a wave had passed through it. And a kind of dance would begin, people swaying from side to side. The swaying would get wilder and wilder. People were afraid they wouldn't have the strength to keep hold of the person in front, that they'd lose their grip—and this fear would make the women start howling, and soon the whole queue would be screaming and it was as if they'd all gone out of their minds, as if they were singing and dancing. Sometimes young louts would try to break into the queue; you could see them looking for the weakest link. When these louts came close, everyone would be howling with fear again—and again, it was as if they were singing. All this was just town folks without ration cards queuing to buy bread—people without passports, people stripped of their civic rights, ordinary artisans, or people who lived out in the suburbs.

"And then there were the peasants—crawling out of their villages, crawling toward the city. The stations were all cordoned off, and the trains were constantly searched. There were army and OGPU roadblocks on every road. All the same, people were getting to Kiev, crawling through fields and bogs, through woods and open country—anything to bypass the roadblocks. It was impossible, after all, to set up blocks everywhere. The peasants could no longer walk—they could only crawl. And so people in Kiev would be hurrying about their affairs—on their way to work, on their way to a cinema...Trams would be running...And in the middle of all this, crawling about among these people, were the starving. Children, men, young girls—all on all fours. They looked more like some kind of filthy little cats or dogs. But they seemed to be trying to be like people. They knew modesty; they knew shame. You'd see a young girl crawling along—all swollen, whining, looking like some kind of monkey. And then she'd be putting her skirt straight, blushing, tucking her long hair under her kerchief. She was, after all, from a village, and this was her first time in Kiev. But it was only the lucky few, only one in ten thousand, who managed to crawl as far as Kiev. Not that it did them any good—there was no salvation even in Kiev. Starving people lay on the ground. They begged, they tried to hiss out words—but they were unable to eat. Someone might have a crust of bread beside him but he couldn't see it any more; he was too far gone.

"Every morning horses pulled flat-top carts through the city. Those who'd died in the night were taken away. I saw one cart, it was stacked with the bodies of children. It was like I've already said. They looked thin and long—faces like dead birdies, sharp little beaks. These little birds had flown to Kiev—and what good had

it done them? Some of them were still making cheeping noises; their little heads were like ripe ears of grain, bending the thin stalks of their necks. I asked the driver. He just gave a shrug of the shoulders. 'They'll quieten down soon enough,' he said.

"I saw one young girl crawl across the sidewalk. A street sweeper gave her a kick, and she rolled onto the roadway. She didn't look around. She just crawled on, fast as she could, heaven knows where she got the strength from. And she even tried to shake the dust off her dress. That same day I bought a Moscow paper. I read an article by Maksim Gorky about how children need *cultured toys*. Did Gorky not know about the children stacked on the cart? Did they really need *cultured toys*? Or maybe Gorky did know—and kept silent, like everyone kept silent. And maybe he too wrote that those dead children were enjoying chicken soup. That same driver told me that the greatest number of dead was by the shops that sold unrationed bread. If you're starving, if you're swollen with dropsy, a single crust can finish you off. Yes, I remember Kiev all right, even though I only spent three days there.

"And this is what I came to understand. At first, hunger drives you out of your home. In the beginning, it burns and torments you—it tears at your guts, at your soul. And so you try to escape your home. People dig for worms, they gather grass—and yes, they even try to fight their way through to Kiev. Whatever they do, they've got to get out, they've got to get away. And then the day comes when the starving man crawls back into his home. That means hunger has won. This one has given up the struggle; he lies down on his bed and stays there. And once hunger has won, you can't get the man up again, try as you might. Not just because he doesn't have the strength but because it's all the same to him; he no longer wants to go on living. He just lies there quietly. All he wants is to be left alone. He doesn't want to eat, he can't stop peeing, he has the runs. All he wants is to sleep, to be left in peace. If you just lie there quietly, it means you're near the end. I've heard the same from prisoners of war. If a prisoner just lay there on the boards, if he stopped caring about his rations, that meant he was close to dying. But there were some people who lost their minds. They only went still at the very end. You could tell who these people were by their bright, shining eyes. These were the ones who cut up corpses and boiled them, who even killed and ate their own children. As the human being died in them, the wild beast came to the surface. I saw one woman who'd been brought to the district center under guard. She had a human face, but the eyes of a wolf. Cannibals, I've heard, were all shot, every last one of them. But these cannibals were not guilty. The guilty ones were those who drove a mother to eat her own children. But you can look all you like—you won't find anyone who admits to being guilty. What they did, they did for the good of everyone. That's why they drove mothers to eat their own children.

"I understood then that every starving man is a kind of cannibal. He eats the flesh off his own body. He leaves only the bones. He consumes his last droplet of fat. Then his mind goes dark—he has eaten his own brains. The starving man has eaten himself up.

"I also had the thought that every starving man dies in his own way. In one hut they're at war, checking on one another, keeping watch on one another, stealing crumbs from one another. Wife against husband; husband against wife. The mother hates her children. But in another hut they live in indestructible love. I knew one woman with four children. She could hardly move her tongue, but she kept telling them fairy tales to try to make them forget their hunger. She hardly had the strength even to lift her own arms, yet she held her children in them. Love lived on in her. Where there was hate, it seemed people died more quickly. But love, for that matter, did not save anyone. Every last person lay down and died. There was no life left.

"The village, I learned later, went silent. There was no sound of children. There was no longer any need for cultured toys—or for chicken soup. There was no wailing—no one left to wail. I learned later that troops were sent in to harvest the winter wheat—but they weren't allowed to enter the dead village. They camped in their tents. They were told that there'd been an epidemic. They kept complaining, though, about the terrible smell from the village. The troops also sowed winter wheat for the following year. And in the spring settlers were brought in from Oryol Province. This was, after all, the Ukraine. It was Black Earth—and Oryol has always been a land of bad harvests. The women and children were left in shelters by the station, and the men were taken into the village. They were given pitchforks and told to go around the huts and drag out the bodies. The dead were just lying there, men and women, some on beds and some on the floor. The smell in the huts was awful. The men tied kerchiefs over their mouths and noses and began dragging out the bodies—but the bodies just fell apart. Finally, all the bits of bodies were buried outside the village. That's when I understood that this was indeed a 'cemetery of the hard school.' Once all the corpses were gone, they brought in the women to clean the floors and whitewash the walls. Everything was done properly, but the smell was still there. They whitewashed the walls a second time and spread new clay on the floors, but the smell still wouldn't go away. They couldn't eat in those huts, and they couldn't sleep in those huts; they all went back to Oryol. But still, earth like that doesn't stay empty and unpeopled for long. How could it?

"And now it's as if those people never lived. But the village had seen all kinds of things. There had been love. Wives leaving husbands, and daughters getting married. People had had drunken fights, and they had had friends and family to stay. They had baked bread. And how they had worked! They had sung songs. Their children had gone to school. Sometimes the mobile cinema had come, and everyone—even the old folks—had gone to see the movies.

"And nothing is left of all that. Where can that life have gone? And that suffering, that terrible suffering? Can there really be nothing left? Is it really true that no one will be held to account for it all? That it will all

just be forgotten without a trace?

“Grass has grown over it.

“How can this be?—I ask you.

“Look—it’s getting light. Our night’s over now. It’s time we both got ready to go out to work.”

Vasily Timofeyevich had a quiet voice and a hesitant way of moving. And when someone talked to Ganna, she would look down at the ground with her brown eyes and reply almost inaudibly.

After their marriage, they both became still more timid. He was fifty years old, and the neighbors' children called him "Grandad"; he was gray-haired, balding, and wrinkled—and he felt embarrassed to have married someone so young. He felt ashamed to be so happy in his love, to find himself whispering "My darling, my sweetheart" as he looked at his wife. As for her, when she was a little girl, she had tried to imagine her future husband. He was going to be a Civil War hero like Shchors; he was going to be the best accordion player in the village; and he was going to be a writer of heartfelt poems like Taras Shevchenko. Nevertheless, even though Vasily Timofeyevich was no longer young; even though he was poor, timid, and generally unlucky; even though he had always lived through others rather than living a life of his own, her meek heart understood the strength of the love he felt for her. And he understood how she, so young, had hoped for more, how she had dreamed of a village knight who would ride up and bear her away from her stepfather's cramped hut—instead of which he had come along in his old boots, with his big brown peasant hands, coughing apologetically and clearing his throat. And now here he was, looking at her happily, adoringly, guiltily and with grief. And she, for her part, felt guilty before him and was meek and silent.

They had a son, Grisha, a quiet little baby who never cried. His mother, now once again looking like a skinny little girl, sometimes went up to his cradle at night. Seeing the boy lying there with open eyes, she would say to him, "Try crying a bit, little Grishenka. Why are you always so silent?"

Even when they were in their own hut, both husband and wife always talked in soft voices. "Why do you always speak so quietly?" neighbors would ask in astonishment.

It was strange that the young woman and her plain, elderly husband should be so alike, equally timid, equally meek in their hearts.

They both worked without a word of complaint. They did not even dare let out a sigh when the brigade leader was unjust, when he sent them out into the fields even if it was not their turn.

Once, Vasily Timofeyevich was sent to the district center on an errand for the collective-farm stables; he went with the farm chairman. While the chairman was going about his business in the land and finance offices, he tied the horses to a post, went into the shop, and bought his wife a treat: some poppy-seed cakes, some candies, some bread rings, some nuts. Not a lot, just 150 grams of each. When he got back home and untied his white kerchief, his wife flung her hands up in the air with joy and cried out, "Oh! Mama!" In his embarrassment, Vasily Timofeyevich went off into the storeroom, so that she would not see the tears of happiness in his eyes.

For Christmas she embroidered a shirt for her husband. Never did she learn that, after she had given it to him, Vasily Timofeyevich Karpenko was hardly able to sleep. All through the night he kept getting up and walking across, in his bare feet, to the little chest of drawers on top of which he had put the shirt. He kept stroking it with the palm of his hand, feeling the simple cross-stitch design...And when he was taking his wife home from the maternity ward of the district hospital, when he saw her holding their child in her arms, he felt that he would never forget this day—even if he were to live a thousand years.

Sometimes he felt frightened. How was it possible for such happiness to have come into his life? How was it possible that he could wake in the middle of the night and find himself listening to the breathing of a wife and a son?

Whoever he was with, Vasily Timofeyevich felt shy and timid. How could he have the right to something like this?

But that was how it was. He came home from work and saw smoke coming out of the chimney and a baby's nappy drying on the fence. He would see his wife bending down over the cradle or smiling about something as she put a bowl of borsch on the table. He would look at her hands, at her hair peeping out from beneath her kerchief. He would listen to her talking about their little one or about the neighbor's ewe. Sometimes she would go out into the storeroom and he would miss her and even feel lonely. As soon as she came back, he would feel happy again. Catching his eye, she would give him a sad, meek smile.

Vasily Timofeyevich died first, two days ahead of little Grisha. He had been giving almost every crumb to his wife and child, and so he died before them. Probably there has been no self-sacrifice in the world greater than this—and no despair greater than his despair as he looked at his wife, already disfigured by the dropsy of death, and at his dying son.

Even during his last hour he felt no indignation, no anger with regard to the great and senseless thing that had been accomplished by the State and Stalin. He did not even ask, "Why?" He did not once ask why the torment of death by starvation had been allotted to him and his wife—meek, obedient, and hardworking as they were—and to their quiet little one-year-old boy.

Still in their rotten rags, the skeletons spent the winter together. The husband, his young wife, and their little son went on smiling whitely, not separated even by death.

The next spring, after the first starlings had arrived, the representative from the district land office entered

the hut, covering his mouth and nose with a handkerchief. He looked at the paraffin lamp with no glass, at the icon in the corner, at the little chest of drawers, at the cold cast-iron pots, and at the bed.

“Two and a child,” he called out.

The brigade leader, standing on this most holy threshold of love and meekness, nodded his head and made a mark on a scrap of paper.

Back in the fresh air, the representative looked at the white huts and the green orchards and said, “Take the corpses away—but don’t bother about this ruin. It’s not worth trying to repair it.”

Once again the brigade leader nodded.

At work Ivan Grigoryevich learned that the officials in the municipal court accept bribes; that it's possible to buy good grades for young people taking the entrance exams for the radio technical college; that a factory director will, for a bribe, supply cooperatives producing consumer goods with metals that are otherwise almost unobtainable; that, with the money he had stolen, the director of a mill had built himself a two-story house and had had the floors laid with oak parquet; that the chief of police had released a notorious wheeler-dealer of a jeweler after his family had paid him the unbelievable sum of 600,000 rubles; and that the first secretary himself—the town boss—was willing, if properly compensated, to order the chairman of the town soviet to sign the certificates entitling you to an apartment in a new building on the main street.

All morning Ivan Grigoryevich's fellow workers had been talking excitedly. They had just heard some important news from the provincial capital; a verdict had finally been reached in the case against the stockkeeper of the town's biggest cooperative, a manufacturer of fur coats, ladies' winter coats, and reindeer and astrakhan fur hats. Although the principal defendant was only a humble stockroom boss, the case had taken on spectacular dimensions; like some giant octopus, it had wound its tentacles around the entire life of the city. The verdict had been impatiently awaited for a long time, and there had been many arguments about it during lunch breaks. Some people thought that the investigator for especially important cases, who was from Moscow, would fearlessly expose every one of the town's most important officials.

After all, even little children knew that the town prosecutor drove about in a Volga given to him by that balding stammerer of a stockroom boss; that the Party secretary now had new bedroom and dining-room suites that had been brought all the way from Riga; that the wife of the chief of police had gone for two months to the Black Sea coast, by plane, to stay—at the expense of this same stockroom boss—in the Council of Ministers' sanatorium in Adler; and that, before she left for the airport, she had received an emerald ring.

The more skeptical insisted that the Muscovite would never dare bring charges against the town bosses and that the stockroom boss and the cooperative administration would have to answer for everything themselves.

And then the student son of the stockroom boss had flown in from the provincial capital with the unexpected news that the investigator for especially important cases had quashed the entire case for lack of evidence. The stockroom boss had been released from custody and the chairman and two other members of the cooperative administration had been released from their bail conditions and were now free to travel.

For some reason the decision taken by the high-ranking Moscow lawyer brought great merriment to the metal workshop. During the lunch break everyone, skeptics and optimists alike, joked and laughed as they ate their bread, sausage, tomatoes, and cucumbers—and there was no knowing whether they were more amused by the human weakness of the investigator for especially important cases or by the apparent omnipotence of the balding stammerer of a stockroom boss.

And it occurred to Ivan Grigoryevich that it was perhaps not so very surprising that incorruptible asceticism, the faith of the barefoot and fanatical apostles of the commune, had led in the end to fraudsters who were ready to do anything for the sake of a good dacha, for a car of their own, for some rubles to put away in their piggy bank.

After work one evening, Ivan Grigoryevich went to the polyclinic and knocked at the door of the doctor he had heard Anna Sergeyevna mention. The doctor, who had just finished seeing patients, was taking off his white coat.

"I would like to know, Doctor, about the health of Mikhalyova, Anna Sergeyevna."

"Who are you?" asked the doctor. "Are you her husband or father?"

"I'm not a relative, but she is someone very close to me."

"I see," said the doctor. "Well, let me say then that she has lung cancer. There's nothing we can do. Neither a surgeon nor a sanatorium can help."

17

Three weeks went by and Anna Sergeyevna went to the hospital. As they said goodbye, she said to Ivan Grigoryevich, “Happiness doesn’t seem to be our fate in this world.”

In the afternoon, while Ivan Grigoryevich was out at work, Anna Sergeyevna’s sister came and took Alyosha away, to live with her in her village.

Ivan Grigoryevich came back to an empty room. It was very quiet there. Although he had lived his whole life alone, it seemed that he had never before felt the full weight of loneliness.

That night he did not sleep; he was thinking. “...doesn’t seem to be our fate in this world...” The only light seemed to be in his distant childhood.

Now that happiness had looked him in the eyes, now that it had breathed on him, he weighed up his life with great acuteness, evaluating all that had befallen him.

It was painful indeed to realize that he was powerless to save Anna Sergeyevna, that he could do nothing to ease the last sufferings that had already begun for her. Strangely, he seemed to find comfort for his grief in thinking about the decades he had spent in camps and prisons.

He was trying to understand the truth of Russian life, what it was that linked past and present.

His hope was that Anna Sergeyevna would return from the hospital and he would tell her all he had recalled, all he had thought, all he had understood.

And she would share with him the burden, and the clarity, of understanding. This was the consolation for his grief. This was his love.

Ivan Grigoryevich often thought about his months in the Lubyanka, and then in the Butyrka.

He had been three times in the Butyrka, but it was the summer of 1937 that he remembered best. Then he had been in a fog, half unconscious, and it was only now, seventeen years later, that the fog had lifted. Only now could he make out what had happened.

The cells in 1937 had been packed—hundreds of prisoners in a space intended for a few dozen. In the sultry heat of July and August people had been pressed close against one another on the bedboards, dazed and soaked with sweat; it was possible to turn over at night only if they all did it together—at the word of the cell elder, a former commander of a Red Army cavalry division. To get to the *parasha* —the latrine barrel—they had to walk over bodies, and the newcomers to the cell, who slept right next to the *parasha*, were known as "parachutists." Sleep—in this cramped and stifling closeness—was more like some kind of swoon, like the delirium of typhus.

The prison walls had seemed to be quivering, like the walls of a boiler that was almost bursting from some vast internal pressure. All night long the Butyrka was humming and throbbing. Outside in the yard cars were delivering new loads of prisoners—all deathly pale as they looked around this great prison kingdom. And there was the roaring of huge Black Marias, taking other loads of prisoners away: for further interrogation in the Lubyanka, to be subjected to torture in the Lefortovo, to the Krasnopresenskaya transit prison, or to be loaded directly onto a transport for Siberia. If the guards called out to a prisoner, "With your belongings!", then he knew he was leaving for a camp, and everyone would say their goodbyes to him. The brilliantly lit corridors were full of the shuffling of prisoners' feet and the clanking of the guards' weapons. Prisoners were not allowed to meet. If two escort guards were coming down a corridor toward each other, one would quickly shove his prisoner into one of the cupboard-like boxes that were to be found at regular intervals along the corridor walls. Then he had to wait in the dark until the other prisoner had passed.

The cell windows were covered by thick wooden panels, and light from outside penetrated only through a narrow slit. The prisoners reckoned time not by the sun or the stars but by the prison's internal schedule. The electric lights burned twenty-four hours a day with merciless brightness; it was as if all the terrible, stifling heat came from them, from their white incandescence. Ventilators hummed night and day, but the torrid air from off the July asphalt brought no relief. At night the air you breathed seemed like layers of hot felt stuffed inside your lungs and head.

Early in the morning prisoners who had been interrogated during the night were brought back to their cells. Some collapsed in exhaustion on the bedboards; some sobbed and groaned; some sat there without moving, staring in front of them with wide eyes; some rubbed their swollen feet and feverishly recounted what they had been through. Some were so weak that they had to be dragged into the cell by the guards. Others—who had been subjected to continuous interrogation for days on end—were taken on stretchers to the prison hospital. When they were in the investigator's office, prisoners remembered their stifling, stinking cell with fondness, longing to be back among the kind, exhausted faces of their bedboard neighbors.

These thousands, these tens of thousands of people—secretaries of district and provincial Party committees; military commissars; heads of political sections; commanding officers of regiments, divisions, and entire armies; captains of ships; agronomists; writers; livestock specialists; officials from the Commissariat of Foreign Trade; engineers; ambassadors; Civil War partisans; public prosecutors; chairmen of factory committees; university professors—included representatives of all the social strata suddenly flung up to the surface by the Revolution. Beside the Russians there were Belorussians, Ukrainians, Lithuanian and Ukrainian Jews, Armenians, Georgians, slow deliberate Latvians, Poles, and people from Central Asia. Whether they had previously been soldiers, workers, peasants, schoolboys, students, or artisans, all of them had taken part in the Revolution and the Civil War. They had smashed the armies of Kornilov and Kaledin, of Kolchak, Denikin, Yudenich, and Wrangel, and had poured in their thousands from the most remote towns and villages into the very heart of Russia, into the heart of a country that had become a wasteland. The Revolution abolished all kinds of restrictions—the *numerus clausus* , property qualifications, various aristocratic privileges, the Pale of Settlement—and hundreds of thousands of people from all walks of life, from Jewish shtetls and from towns and villages all over Russia, took charge of committees, organs, and soviets of every kind: of district and provincial *Chekas*; of *RevKoms*, *UKoms,* and *GubProdKoms* ; of *KomBeds, PolitProsvets,* and *SovNarKhozes* . They began to build a State such as the world had never seen. Cruelty, murders, deprivations of every kind—all this was of no account. It was, after all, being carried out in the name of Russia and laboring humanity, in the name of the happiness of the working people.

Then came the 1930s. The young men who had taken part in the Civil War were now in their forties, with graying hair. The time of the Revolution, of Committees of the Poor, of the first and second congresses of the Comintern was their youth; it was the happiest, most romantic period of their life. They now worked in offices with telephones and secretaries; they had exchanged their military tunics for jackets and ties; they traveled about by cars and had consultations with famous doctors; they had learned to appreciate good wines and the joys of holidays in spa towns like Kislovodsk; but, in spite of all this, the days of pointed Budyonny helmets

and leather jackets, of millet porridge, of boots full of holes, of the world commune and ideals of unbounded, planetary scope—those days remained the high point of their lives. It was not for the sake of dachas and cars of their own that they had built a new State. This new State had been built for the sake of the Revolution. It was in the name of the Revolution and of a new Russia, free of landowners and capitalists, that sacrifices had been exacted, acts of cruelty committed, and blood shed.

The generation of Soviet citizens that disappeared in 1936 and 1939 was not, of course, monolithic.

The first to disappear were the fanatics, the destroyers of the old world, those whose verve and zeal, whose devotion to the Revolution was embodied in the hatred they bore to its enemies.

They hated the bourgeoisie, the nobility, the petits-bourgeois, the Mensheviks, and the Socialist Revolutionaries—all of them traitors to the working class. They hated the prosperous peasantry; opportunists of every kind; former Tsarist officers being taken on to serve as 'military specialists' in the Red Army; mercenary bourgeois art; venal university lecturers who had sold out to the bourgeoisie; dandies who wore ties; doctors engaged in private practice; women who powdered their noses and strutted about in silk stockings; foppish, reactionary students who only pretended to support the Revolution; priests and rabbis; engineers with cockade caps; poets who, like Fet, wrote decadent little verses about the beauty of nature. They hated Karl Kautsky and Ramsay MacDonald. They did not read Bernstein, but to them he seemed an appalling figure, although his notorious evolutionary-socialist formula, "The goal is nothing, movement is everything," turned out, in the end, to have encapsulated their fate.

They destroyed the old world and longed for a new world, but they did not build this new world themselves. The hearts of these people—people who made the earth stream with blood, people who hated so many different things and with such passion—were childishly innocent. They were the hearts of fanatics, the hearts—perhaps—of madmen. They hated for the sake of love.

They were the dynamite that the Party used to destroy the old Russia, to make space for the foundation pits of grandiose new constructions, for the granite of a new State.

Soon after these people, the first builders appeared. Their zeal was directed to the creation of a Party and State apparatus, to the construction of plants and factories, to the laying of roads and railways, to the digging of canals, to the mechanization of Soviet agriculture.

These were the first "Red merchants," the fathers of Soviet cast iron, of Soviet calico, of Soviet airplanes. Not noticing whether it was day or night, not noticing the Siberian cold or the heat of the Kara-Kum desert, they dug the foundations and raised the walls of new Soviet skyscrapers.

Gvakhariya, Frankfurt, Zavenyagin, Gugel...

Among these were some few who died a natural death.

And then there were the Party leaders who built up and governed the various Soviet national republics, territories, and provinces: Postyshev, Kirov, Vareikis, Betal Kalmykov, Faizulla Khodzhaev, Mendel Khatayevich, Eikhe...

Not one of these died a natural death.

They were vivid, brilliant people: orators; connoisseurs of books, poetry, and philosophy; lovers of hunting, feasting, and drinking.

Their telephones rang all day and all night; their secretaries worked in three shifts; but unlike the fanatics and dreamers these men knew how to enjoy life. They enjoyed spacious, sun-filled dachas; they enjoyed hunting mountain goats and wild boar; they enjoyed long, merry Sunday dinners; they knew how to appreciate Armenian cognacs and Georgian wines. They no longer wore leather jackets in winter, and the gabardine of their Stalin-style soldier's tunics was more expensive than woolen cloth from England.

What was remarkable about these men was their energy, their strength of will, and their complete inhumanity. All of them—those who loved nature, those who loved poetry and music, those who loved feasting and drinking—were inhuman.

They had no doubt that the new world was being built for the people. It did not trouble them that it was the people themselves—the workers, the peasants, the intelligentsia—who constituted the most insuperable obstacle to the building of this new world.

Sometimes it seemed that the powerful energy with which these leaders of the new world were endowed—their iron wills and their capacity for boundless cruelty—was being expended to only one end: to force half-starving people to work with never a day off, beyond their strength, for beggarly pay, while being quartered in primitive barracks and paying every possible kind of tax, levy, loan, and assessment on a scale never before seen in history.

But men were building what no man needed. All of these projects—the White Sea canal, the arctic mines, the railways constructed north of the Arctic Circle, the vast factories hidden in the Siberian *taiga*, the superpowerful hydroelectric power stations deep in the wilderness—were of no use to anyone. It often seemed that these factories, these canals and artificial seas in the desert were of no use even to the Soviet State, let alone to human beings. Sometimes it seemed that the only purpose of these vast constructions was to shackle millions of people with the shackles of labor.

Marx, Lenin (his greatest prophet), and Stalin (their great successor and developer of their work) all saw the primacy of economics over politics as the most fundamental truth of their revolutionary doctrine.

And not one of these builders of a new world gave any thought to the fact that by building vast factories

that were useless to human beings and often to the State as well, they were overturning Marx's thesis.

The State created by Lenin and consolidated by Stalin was founded not on economics but on politics.

It was politics that determined the content of Stalin's five-year plans. Every one of Stalin's actions—as well as those of his Soviet of People's Commissars, his *GosPlan* or State Planning Committee, his People's Commissariat of Heavy Industry, his People's Commissariat of Agriculture, his Committee for Grain Procurements, his People's Commissariat for Trade—constituted an absolute triumph of politics over economics.

The builders of the new world did not think—as during the Civil War—that they were accomplishing a World Revolution, constructing a Universal Commune. But they believed that Socialism in One Country, in a new, young Russia, was at least the dawn of the day of universal socialism.

And then came 1937—and the prisons were filled with hundreds of thousands of people from the generation of the Revolution and the Civil War. It was *they* who had defended the Soviet State—they were both the fathers of this State and its children. And now it was *they* who were being taken into the prisons they had built for the enemies of the new Russia. They themselves had created the new order and endowed it with terrible power—and now this terrible chastising might, the might of dictatorship, was being unleashed against *them*. They themselves had forged the sword of the Revolution—and now this sword was falling on *their* heads. To many of them it seemed as if they had entered a time of chaos and insanity.

Why were they being forced to confess to crimes they had never committed? Why had they been declared enemies of the people? Why were they being cast out from the life they had built, the life they had defended in battle?

It seemed mad to them that they were being equated with those whom they hated and despised, with those they had destroyed as fanatically and mercilessly as if they were rabid dogs.

In the prison cells and camp barracks they found themselves beside Mensheviks whom they had failed to finish off, beside former factory owners and landowners.

Some believed that there had been a coup d'état, that their enemies had seized power—and that these enemies, while continuing to use Soviet language and Soviet concepts, were now settling accounts with those who had conceived and created the Soviet State.

Sometimes a former district Party committee secretary would end up in the same cell as the district Party committee secretary before him, whom he had himself unmasked as an enemy of the people; and then, a month later, yet another Party committee secretary from the same district would join them on the bedboards. He too, the unmasker of the previous secretary, had now been unmasked. Everything had become one: the clatter and clanking of the trains heading north; the barking of guard dogs; the squeaking of boots and ladies' summer shoes on the crunchy taiga snow; the scratching of investigators' pens; spades grating against frozen earth as *zeks* dug graves for other *zeks* who had died from scurvy, from the cold, from heart attacks; people's repentant appeals, at Party meetings, to be treated with clemency; people with white, dead lips, repeating after the investigator the words, "I confess that, having become a paid agent of foreign intelligence, inspired by a ferocious hatred of everything Soviet, I was preparing to commit acts of terrorism against Soviet statesmen and at the same time supplying secret information..."

Muffled by the thick stone of the Lefortovo or the Butyrka—the constant crackle of rifle and pistol shots: nine grams of lead in the chest or the back of the head for the thousands, for the tens of thousands of innocents discovered to have committed "especially vicious acts of espionage or terrorism."

And those builders of the new world who were still free kept on trying to divine: "Will they, won't they?" Everyone was waiting for a knock on the door in the night, the whisper of car tires outside the building, and then a sudden silence.

And so, in chaos and absurdity, in the madness of false accusations, the generation of the Civil War disappeared. New days began, and new actors appeared on the stage...

Mekler, Lev Naumovich...He had used to wear size forty-five shoes and a size fifty-eight suit from the Moscow Tailoring Combine. And now he had been sentenced under Article 58: betrayal of the Motherland, terrorism, sabotage, never mind a few other things.

He had not been shot, probably because he was one of the first to be arrested. At that time death sentences had not been handed out with such freedom.

Stumbling, squinting shortsightedly and distractedly, he had gone through all the circles of the prison and camp hell. He had not perished because an inner fire—the faith that had consumed him since adolescence—had protected him from scurvy and from malnutrition, from bitter winds and from nights when the temperature fell to forty degrees below zero. Nor had he died of dysentery; nor had he perished when a barge packed with prisoners sank in the Yenisey.

He had not had his throat cut by the common criminals. He had not been tortured to death in a punishment cell or beaten to death during interrogation. He had not been shot during a mass purge, at a time when every tenth prisoner was being shot.

Where had this powerful flame of fanaticism come from? How had it appeared in this son of a sad, sly shopkeeper from the shtetl of Fastov? How had it sprung up in a young man who had studied in a commercial school and who had been brought up on the Golden Library and on the adventure stories of Louis Boussenard? What had instilled him with this hatred of capitalism? Neither he nor his father, after all, had spent years down mines or in factories filled with smoke and dust.

Who or what had given him the soul of a fighter? The example of Zhelyabov and Kalyaev? The wisdom of *The Communist Manifesto*? The sufferings of the poor next door?

Or had these coals been smoldering deep in the millennial abyss of heredity, ready to burst into flame in the struggle against Caesar's soldiers or against the Spanish Inquisition, in the hunger and intellectual frenzy of Talmud Torah schools, in a shtetl's attempt to defend itself during a pogrom?

Maybe it was indeed these thousands of years of humiliation, the anguish of exile in Babylon, the humiliations of the shtetl, the poverty of the Pale of Settlement, that had engendered the frenzy for justice that had forged the soul of the Bolshevik Lev Mekler?

His inability to adapt to everyday life evoked both mockery and admiration. To some there had seemed something saintly about this Komsomol leader in torn sandals, in a calico shirt with an open collar, with nothing on his head but his curly hair—and he had seemed no less saintly as a regimental commissar wearing a torn leather jacket and a peaked Budyonny helmet with a red star that had faded as if from loss of blood. And he had been no less unshaven and ragged when, as commissar of justice for the entire Ukraine, he had gotten out of his car in a tattered raincoat with missing buttons and walked, in winter, to his office.

He had seemed helpless, as if not of this world, but there were some who remembered listening reverently to him during stormy meetings at the front and then following him into the fire of Wrangel's machine guns.

He was a preacher, an apostle, a soldier of the world socialist revolution. For the sake of the Revolution he was ready, without a second thought, to give up everything—his life, the love of a woman, all those nearest and dearest to him. The only thing it was impossible for him to give up was happiness—since nothing could have brought him more happiness than to go to the stake for the Revolution, to sacrifice for her everything on earth that a human being holds dear.

The future world order seemed to him infinitely splendid, and for its sake Mekler was ready to employ the most pitiless violence.

He was, essentially, someone kindhearted. If a mosquito was sucking his blood, rather than crushing it with a slap of the hand, he would send it on its way with a delicate flick of his fingers. If he caught a bedbug on the scene of the crime, he would wrap it in a piece of paper and carry it outside.

What distinguished his service to the Revolution and the good of humanity was his lack of pity for suffering and his readiness to shed blood.

In his revolutionary purity he imprisoned his father and testified against him before the Cheka. And when his sister begged him to defend her husband, who had been arrested as a saboteur, he turned his back on her cruelly and sullenly.

In his meekness he was pitiless toward those who held the wrong views. To him the Revolution seemed helpless and childishly trustful—surrounded as she was by treachery, the cruelty of the wicked and villainous, the filth of those who wished to corrupt her.

And so he was pitiless toward the enemies of the Revolution.

On his revolutionary conscience there was only one stain. Without telling the Party, he had given help to his old mother, the widow of a man who had been shot by the organs of justice. And, after her death, he had paid for her to be given a religious funeral; that had been her last, pathetic wish.

His vocabulary, his way of thinking, his actions all sprang from one and the same source: the books written in the name of the Revolution, the justice and morality of the Revolution, the poetry of the Revolution, and the strategy of the Revolution—her marching soldiers, her visions, her songs.

It was through the eyes of the Revolution that he looked at the stars in the sky and at birch leaves in April; it was from her most sweet cup that he drank the charm, the potion of first love; it was in the light of her wisdom that he understood the battle in ancient Rome between patricians and slaves, the struggle between landowners and serfs, the class warfare between factory owners and the proletariat. The Revolution was his mother, his tender beloved, his sun, his destiny.

And now the Revolution had put him in a cell in the Lubyanka and knocked out eight of his teeth. Swearing obscenely and calling him a mangy Yid, stamping on him with officer's boots, she had demanded that he, her son, her beloved apostle, should confess himself to be her secret and mortal enemy, her would-be poisoner.

He did not, of course, renounce the Revolution. During conveyor-belt interrogations that went on for a hundred hours his faith did not waver for even a moment; his faith did not waver when he lay on the floor and saw the polished toe of a box-calf boot beside his blood-filled mouth. The Revolution was coarse, obtuse, and cruel as she interrogated him under torture; she was enraged by the loyalty, by the meek patience of the Old Bolshevik, Lev Mekler.

This rage was the rage of a man trying to drive away a mongrel who won't stop following at his heels. First he quickens his steps; then he shouts at the dog and stamps his feet; then he shakes his fist at the dog and throws stones at it. The dog runs away, but when, a hundred yards farther on, the man looks around, he sees the now crippled dog hurriedly limping after him—as determinedly faithful as ever.

And what the man finds most abhorrent of all is the look in those doggy eyes—so meek, so sad and loving, so fanatical in their devotion.

The dog's love enrages its master. The dog sees this rage and cannot understand it. The dog cannot understand that, while committing an unprecedented injustice, the master wants, at least a little, to appease his conscience. The dog's meekness and devotion have been driving him insane. He hates the dog for this love more than he ever hated the wolves against which the dog once defended the house of his youth. He is hoping, through his coarse brutality, to put an end to this love.

Shocked by this sudden, inexplicable cruelty, the dog keeps on following the master.

Why? Why?

And the dog cannot understand that there is nothing absurd or senseless about this sudden hatred; the dog cannot understand that everything is real and rational.

This hatred is normal and predictable; it is an expression of a clear, mathematical logic. To the dog, however, it seems like a spell of madness. It all seems wild and senseless, and the dog even feels anxious on the master's behalf. The dog wants to rescue the master from his blindness—for the master's sake, not for its own. And the dog loves the master and therefore cannot leave him.

And the master understands now that the dog is not going to leave him. The master knows now that the only thing he can do is to strangle the dog or shoot it.

And in order that this execution—this execution of a dog that adores and idolizes him—should not weigh on his conscience or evoke the disapproval of his neighbors, the master decides that this dog must be turned into an enemy, into an artificial enemy. Let the dog confess, before dying, that it wished to tear its master to pieces.

It is easier to kill an enemy than to kill a friend.

In that first house, after all—in the house he built in his youth in the midst of gloomy and deserted ruins, in the house where he once prayed with a pure heart—the dog was his friend and guard, his inseparable companion.

So let the dog confess that it was in cahoots with the wolves.

And in its death agony, as it is being choked with a rope, the dog looks at its master with meek love, with a faith equal to that which led the first Christian martyrs to their deaths.

And the dog never understood one very simple thing: its master had left that house of prayer and youthful intoxication and moved into a building of granite and glass, and his village mongrel had begun to seem an absurdity, a burden. More than a burden—a danger. Which was why he killed it.

The years passed, the dust and the fog cleared, and it became possible to make out what had happened. What had once seemed like chaos or insanity, like self-destruction, like a chain of absurd coincidences, what had once driven people out of their minds because it seemed so mysteriously and tragically senseless—all this gradually became recognizable as the clear, distinct attributes of the new reality.

The fate of the generation of the Revolution now ceased to seem mystical and extraordinary and began to seem entirely logical. And Ivan Grigoryevich felt able, at last, to understand his country's new fate—the fate that had been built on the bones of that generation.

The Bolshevik generation had been formed in the days of the Revolution, in the days when the ideal of a World Commune held sway, when people took part in inspired, hungry, voluntary working Saturdays. That generation took on its shoulders the legacy of the World War and the Civil War—chaos, famine, typhus, anarchy, crime, and banditry. Through Lenin's lips it proclaimed that there was a party that could set Russia on a new path. Without hesitation, it accepted the legacy of hundreds of years of Russian despotism, during which dozens of generations had come and gone, knowing no rights except that of a master to do as he pleased with his serfs.

Under Lenin's leadership the Bolshevik generation dissolved the Constituent Assembly and destroyed the democratic revolutionary parties that had struggled against Russian absolutism.

The Bolshevik generation did not—in the context of bourgeois Russia—believe in the value of individual freedom; it did not believe in the value of freedom of speech or of freedom of the press.

Like Lenin, it saw as irrelevant nonsense the freedoms of which the intelligentsia and many revolutionary workers had long dreamed.

The young State destroyed the democratic parties, clearing the way for Soviet construction. By the end of the 1920s, these parties had been liquidated. Men who had been imprisoned under the Tsar were either back in prison or carrying out forced labor.

The year 1930 saw the total collectivization of agriculture.

Not long after this the ax was raised yet again. This time, however, it was on the generation of the Civil War that the ax fell. A small part of this generation survived, but its soul, its faith in a World Commune, its romantic and revolutionary strength disappeared with those who were destroyed in 1937. Those who were left, those who went on living and working, managed to adapt to the new time and its new people.

The new people did not believe in the Revolution. They were the children not of the Revolution but of the new State that the Revolution had created.

The new State had no need of holy apostles, of frenzied, possessed builders, of faithful disciples. The new State no longer even needed servants; it needed employees. And the State's only misgiving with regard to these employees was that they did, on occasion, turn out to be very petty-minded indeed—and thieving rascals into the bargain.

Terror and dictatorship swallowed up their creators. The State, which had seemed to be a means, had now proved to be an end in itself. The people who had created this State had seen it as a means of realizing their ideals. It turned out, however, that their dreams and ideals had been a means employed by a great and terrible State. The State was no longer a servant but a grim autocrat. It was not the people who needed the Red Terror of 1919. It was not the people who did away with freedom of speech and freedom of the press. It was not the people who needed the death of millions of peasants—most of the people, after all, *were* peasants. It was not the people who chose, in 1937, to fill the prisons and camps. It was not the people who needed the murderous deportations, the resettlement in Siberia and Central Asia, of the Crimean Tatars, Kalmyks, Balkars, Chechens, and Volga Germans, of Russified Bulgarians and Greeks. Nor was it the people who destroyed the workers' right to strike or the peasants' right to sow what they chose. It was not the people who added huge taxes to the price of consumer goods.

The State became the master. The national element moved from the realm of form to the realm of content; it became what was most central and essential, turning the socialist element into a mere wrapping, a verbal husk, an empty shell. Thus was made manifest, with tragic clarity, a sacred law of life: Human freedom stands above everything. There is no end in the world for the sake of which it is permissible to sacrifice human freedom.

It was strange. When Ivan Grigoryevich remembered the year 1937, and the women who had been sentenced to hard labor because of their husbands; when he recalled Anna Sergeyevna's account of total collectivization and the famine in the Ukrainian countryside; when he thought about the laws according to which workers were sent to prison for getting to work twenty minutes late and peasants were sentenced to eight years in the camps for hiding a few grains of wheat; when Ivan Grigoryevich pondered these things, it was not a man with a mustache, not a man wearing a military tunic and boots, whom he saw in his mind's eye. No, it was not Stalin he saw in his mind's eye, but Lenin.

It was as if Lenin's life had not come to an end on January 21, 1924.

Now and again Ivan Grigoryevich wrote down his thoughts about Lenin and Stalin in a school exercise book left behind by Alyosha.

All the victories of the Party and the State were associated with the name of Lenin. But Lenin also seemed responsible for all the terrible cruelties that had been carried out in the country.

The tragedies of the countryside, the year 1937, the new bureaucracy, the new bourgeoisie, forced labor—all of these found their justification in Lenin's revolutionary passion, in Lenin's speeches, articles, and appeals.

And little by little, over the years, Lenin's features changed. The image of the young student called Volodya Ulyanov, of the young Marxist who went by the name of Tulin, of the Siberian exile, of the revolutionary émigré, of the political writer and thinker called Vladimir Ilyich Lenin; the image of the man who had proclaimed the era of the world socialist revolution; the image of the creator of a revolutionary dictatorship in Russia, the man who had liquidated every revolutionary party in Russia except the one that seemed to him the most revolutionary of all; the image of the man who had dissolved the Constituent Assembly, which represented every class and party of postrevolutionary Russia, and who had created soviets where only revolutionary workers and peasants were to be represented—this image changed. Features familiar from portraits changed; the image of the first Soviet head of state changed.

Lenin's work continued—and as it acquired new features, so the image of the dead Lenin acquired new features.

Lenin was an intellectual. His family belonged to the working intelligentsia. His brothers and sisters belonged to the revolutionary movement. His elder brother, Aleksandr, became a hero and holy martyr of the Revolution.

The writers of memoirs all say that, even as the leader of the Revolution, as the creator of the Party, as the head of the Soviet government, he remained someone modest and simple. He did not smoke or drink and, in all probability, he never in his life cursed and swore at someone in truly foul language. There was a student purity about his idea of leisure: music, the theater, books, walks. He always dressed democratically, almost as if he were poor.

The little Volodya who was so loved by his mother and sisters, the young man who listened to the *Appassionata* and read and reread *War and Peace*, the young man who wore a crumpled tie and an old jacket and sat in the gallery of the theater—can this really have been the man who founded a State that chose to adorn the chests of Yagoda, Yezhov, Beria, Merkulov, and Abakumov with its highest honor, with his very own Order of Lenin?

On the anniversary of Lenin's death the Order of Lenin was awarded to Lydia Timashuk. Was this an indication that Lenin's cause had dried and withered—or that it was truly triumphing?

Five-Year Plans passed. Decades passed. Events of incandescent immediacy cooled and hardened. Encased by the cement of time, they turned into great slabs—into the history of the Soviet State.

> No artist has painted
> A true portrait of Lenin.
> Ages to come will complete
> Lenin's unfinished portrait.

Did Poletaev understand the tragic implication of his lines about Lenin? The character traits emphasized by the authors of memoirs and biographies, character traits which once seemed central and which charmed millions of minds and hearts—these traits proved in the end to be entirely incidental to the course of history. The history of the Russian State did not choose these human and humane sides of Lenin's character but cast them aside as unwanted trash. The history of the State did not need the Lenin who admired *War and Peace* and who listened to the *Appassionata* with his face buried in his hands. It did not need Lenin's modest and democratic tastes; it did not need his warmth and attentiveness toward drivers and secretaries; nor did it need his conversations with peasant children, his kindness toward domestic animals, or the deep pain he felt when Julius Martov ceased to be his friend and became his enemy.

But everything about Lenin that had been seen as temporary and accidental, everything that had been put down to the particular circumstances of the revolutionary underground and the desperate struggles of the first

Soviet years—all this turned out to be of lasting, defining importance.

The authors of memoirs say nothing about the aspect of Lenin's character that led him to order a search of Georgy Plekhanov's apartment as he lay dying, but it is this aspect of Lenin's character—the aspect that determined his total intolerance of political democracy—that proved dominant.

A man who has gone up in the world, a merchant or factory owner from a peasant family who now lives in a mansion of his own and travels on his private yacht—such a man may still display peasant traits; he may still love kvass, pickled-cabbage soup, and crude, vivid popular expressions. A field marshal in gold braid may still like to roll his own cigarettes from *makhorka* ; he may still enjoy the basic humor of the aphorisms that soldiers come out with.

But do these traits, do these tastes and fond memories matter to the millions of people whose fates are determined by the factories owned by the ex-peasant, by the movements of stock prices or armies?

It is not through love of pickled-cabbage soup and *makhorka* that an industrialist acquires wealth or a general wins glory.

The author of one memoir about Lenin describes going for a Sunday walk with him in the Swiss mountains. Out of breath after a steep climb, they reached a summit and sat down on a rock. The young woman thought that Vladimir Ilyich's intent gaze was taking in every smallest detail of the beautiful alpine landscape. She felt moved and excited, thinking of the poetry that was flooding his soul. All of a sudden he sighed and said, "These Mensheviks—they're really fouling things up for us!"

This charming little story tells us a lot about Lenin. On one side of the scales—the whole of Creation. On the other side of the scales—the Party.

October selected those of Vladimir Ilyich's traits that it needed. It cast away those that it did not need.

Throughout its entire history, the Russian revolutionary movement included within it the most contradictory qualities. The genuine love for the people to be found in many Russian revolutionaries—men whose meekness and readiness to endure suffering has been seen before only in the early Christians—coexisted with a fierce contempt toward human suffering, an extreme veneration of abstract principles, and an implacable determination to destroy not only one's enemies but also one's comrades-in-arms, should their interpretation of these principles differ in any slightest way from one's own. This sectarian single-mindedness, this readiness to suppress today's living freedom for the sake of a hypothetical future freedom, to transgress ordinary, everyday morality in the name of some future principle—all of this can be found in Pestel, in Bakunin and Nechaev, and in some of what was said and done by members of The People's Will.

No, it was not only love, not only compassion that led such people along the path of revolution. To find what engendered these people, one needs to look far back into the thousand-year depths of Russian history.

Similar figures existed in previous centuries, but it was the twentieth century that brought them out from the wings and placed them center stage.

This kind of person is like a surgeon in a hospital ward. His interest in the patients and their families, his jokes, the arguments he takes part in, his struggles on behalf of homeless children, and his concern for workers who have reached the age of retirement—all of this is unimportant, trifling, a mere husk. His soul lies in his surgeon's knife.

What is most important about this man is his fanatical faith in the omnipotence of the surgeon's knife. It is the surgeon's knife that is the twentieth century's true theoretician, its greatest philosophical leader.

During the fifty-four years of his life, Lenin did more than listen to the *Appassionata*, reread *War and Peace*, have heart-to-heart talks with peasant delegates, admire the Russian landscape, and worry about whether his secretary had a proper winter coat. This goes without saying; it should be no surprise that Lenin possessed a real face, not only an image.

And one can imagine Lenin giving expression to any number of different character traits and peculiarities in his daily life—in that daily life that we all inevitably lead, whether we are dentists, leaders of nations, or cutters in a ladies' clothing workshop.

These traits can manifest themselves at any moment of night or day, as a man washes his face in the morning, as he eats his porridge, as he looks out through the window at a pretty woman whose skirt has been caught by the wind, as he uses a match to pick his teeth, as he feels jealous about his wife or tries to make her feel jealous about him, as he looks at his bare legs in the bathhouse and scratches his armpits, as he reads scraps of newspaper in the toilet, trying to piece a torn page together, as he farts and at once tries to mask the sound by coughing or humming.

Such moments occur in the lives of both the great and the small, and they can, of course, be found in Lenin's life.

Maybe Lenin developed a paunch because he ate too much macaroni and butter, preferring it to vegetables.

Maybe he and his wife had arguments, unknown to the world, about how often he washed his feet or brushed his teeth, or about his reluctance to change a worn shirt with a dirty collar.

And it may indeed be possible to break through the fortifications surrounding a supposedly human but in reality unreal and exalted image of the leader. It may be possible, creeping along silently on your stomach or with quick, sudden dashes, to reach a true, authentic Lenin that no memoirist has described.

But what would we gain from knowing the hidden truth of Lenin's behavior in bathroom, bedroom, or dining room? Would this help us toward a deeper understanding of Lenin, the leader of the new Russia, the

founder of a new world order? Would we be able to find any real correlation between the true nature of Lenin and the nature of the State he founded? In order to establish such a correlation, we would have to assume that Lenin behaved in the same way as a political leader as he did in his everyday life. This assumption, however, would be arbitrary and mistaken; such correlations, after all, are as likely to be inverse as to be direct—people behave differently in different spheres of their life.

In his personal relationships—when he gave someone help, when he stayed the night with friends or went out for a walk with them—Lenin was always polite, sensitive, and kind. Yet Lenin was always rude, harsh, and implacable toward his political opponents. He never admitted the least possibility that they might be even partially right, that he might be even partially wrong.

"Venal...lackey...groveler...hireling...agent...a Judas bought for thirty pieces of silver..."—these were the words Lenin used of his opponents.

It was never Lenin's aim, in a dispute, to win his opponent over to his own views. He did not even truly address his opponent; the people for whom his words were intended were the witnesses to the dispute. Lenin's aim was always to ridicule his opponent, to compromise him in the eyes of witnesses. These witnesses might be a few close friends, they might be an audience of a thousand conference delegates, or they might be the million readers of an article in a newspaper.

Lenin's concern in an argument was not with truth but with victory. He needed, at all cost, to be victorious—and to this end he was happy to employ any rhetorical means. He was equally ready to trip his opponent from behind, to give him a metaphorical slap in the face, or to daze him with a metaphorical blow on the head.

It seems clear that Lenin's behavior in his private, everyday life had no connection with how he behaved as the leader of a new world order.

And when the dispute moved from the pages of newspapers and magazines to the streets, when it moved to military battlefields or to fields of rye—then too there was nothing that Lenin shrank from, no tactics too vicious for him to employ.

Lenin's intolerance, his unshakable drive to achieve his purpose, his contempt for freedom, his brutality toward those who did not share his views, his unwavering readiness to wipe off the face of the earth not only fortresses but also whole districts, regions, and provinces that challenged his view of the truth—all this was a part of Lenin long before October. All this was deep-rooted; all these aspects of Lenin's character and behavior were present in the young Volodya Ulyanov.

All his abilities, all his will and passion were directed toward one end: the seizure of power.

To this end he sacrificed everything. In order to seize power he sacrificed what was most holy in Russia: her freedom. This freedom was childishly helpless; it was inexperienced and naive. How could this eight-month-old baby, born in a land with a heritage of a thousand years of slavery—how could this infant freedom have acquired experience?

The cultured, intellectual side of Lenin—which had once seemed what was deepest and truest about him—always receded into the background as soon as the going got difficult. Lenin's true character then manifested in his iron will—in his frenzied, unyielding strength of will.

What led Lenin along the path of revolution? Love for people? A wish to put an end to the misery of the peasantry, to the workers' poverty and lack of rights? A faith in the truth of Marxism, in the rectitude of his own Party?

The Russian Revolution, for him, had nothing to do with Russian freedom. But the power to which he so passionately aspired was not something he needed personally.

And here we come to something unique about Lenin: the simplicity of his character engendered a certain complexity.

In order to crave power so fiercely, one must be endowed with enormous political ambition. This love of power is something crude and simple. But this driven figure, who was capable of anything in his pursuit of power, was modest in his private life and did not seek power for his own self. It is at this point that Lenin's simplicity ends and his complexity begins.

If we try to imagine a private Lenin who is an exact equivalent of the political Lenin, we will be confronted with a ranting dogmatist—someone harsh and primitive, high-handed, domineering, pitiless, insanely ambitious.

It is frightening even to think of Lenin behaving in this way in his everyday life—toward his friends and family, toward someone he shared an apartment with.

But that was not how it was. The private man turned out to be the inverse of the man on the world stage. Plus and minus, minus and plus.

And the overall picture turns out to be very different; it turns out to be complicated, in some ways tragic.

Insane political ambition together with an old jacket, a glass of weak tea, a student garret.

The ability to trample one's opponent into the mud without a second thought, to deafen and stun him during an argument, combined with a sweet smile, with a shy sensitivity.

Implacable cruelty, a contempt for freedom—the holy of holies of the Russian Revolution—along with a pure, youthful delight in fine music or a good book.

Lenin...First there is the deified image. Then there is the image created by his enemies—an image all of a

piece, an image that has him behaving as harshly and cruelly in his everyday life as in his role as leader of the new world order. Finally, there is a third image—an image that seems to me to be closer to reality but that is not easy to make sense of.

In order to understand Lenin, we have to do more than examine his qualities as a politician or the qualities he showed in everyday life. We have to correlate Lenin's character first with the supposed national character of the Russian people and then with the overall thrust of Russian history.

In his asceticism and natural modesty, Lenin had an affinity with Russian pilgrims. In his faith and directness, he answered to the folk ideal of a religious teacher. In his attachment to Russian nature, to its forests and meadows, he was akin to the Russian peasantry. His receptivity to Hegel and Marx and Western thought as a whole, his ability to absorb and give expression to the spirit of the West, was the manifestation of a deeply Russian trait first pointed out by Chaadaev. It is the same universal sympathy, the same astonishing ability to enter deep into the spirit of another nation, that Dostoevsky famously saw in Pushkin. This receptivity makes Lenin akin both to Pushkin and to Peter the Great.

Lenin's fanatical, possessed quality is similar to the religious faith, the religious frenzy of Avvakum. And Avvakum is an entirely native-born, Russian phenomenon.

In the nineteenth century, Russian thinkers looked to the Russian national character, the Russian soul, and Russian religious nature for an explanation of Russia's historical path.

Chaadaev, one of the most intelligent figures of that century, emphasized the ascetic and sacrificial quality of Russian Christianity, its undiluted Byzantine purity.

Dostoevsky saw universality, an aspiration toward the universally human, as the true foundation of the Russian soul.

Twentieth-century Russia loves to repeat the predictions made about it by earlier Russian thinkers and prophets: Gogol, Chaadaev, Belinsky, Dostoevsky.

But who would not like to repeat such things about himself?

The nineteenth-century prophets predicted that Russia would, in the future, lead the spiritual evolution not only of Europe but also of the entire world.

These foretellers were speaking not of Russian military glory but of the glory of the Russian heart, of Russian faith, of the example that Russia would set.

Gogol's flying troika...Dostoevsky's "It is for the Russian soul, all-human and all-unifying, to accommodate within itself, in brotherly love, all our brothers, and, in the end, perhaps, to speak the final word of the great general harmony, of the final brotherly concord of all tribes according to the law of the Gospel of Christ..." Chaadaev's "Then we will naturally take our place among the nations chosen to act amid humanity not only as battering rams but also through their ideas..." Gogol's "Russia, are you not also like the bold troika which no one can overtake? The road is a cloud of smoke under your wheels, the bridges thunder..."

And then, in the same letter, Chaadaev brilliantly put his finger on a striking feature of Russian history: "the enormous fact of the gradual enslavement of our peasantry, which can only be seen as the strictly logical consequence of our entire history."

The implacable suppression of the individual personality—its total, servile subjection to the sovereign and the State—has been a constant feature of Russian history. This too was seen and recognized by the Russian prophets.

But along with the suppression of the individual by prince, landowner, sovereign, and State, the Russian prophets sensed a purity, profundity, and clarity unknown to the Western world. They saw a Christlike power—the power of the Russian soul—and they prophesied a great and brilliant future for this soul. These prophets all agreed that the Christian ideal had been embodied in the Russian soul in an ascetic, Byzantine, anti-Western manner—in a way quite independent of the State—and that the forces inherent in the Russian soul would manifest themselves as a powerful influence on the peoples of Europe. They believed that these forces would purify and transform the life of the Western world, enlightening it in the spirit of brotherhood, and that the Western world would joyfully and trustingly follow this Russian man who was so universal in his humanity. These prophecies of Russia's most powerful minds and hearts had one fatal flaw in common. They all saw the power of the Russian soul and its significance for the world, but they all failed to see that this soul had been a slave for a thousand years, that its peculiarities had been engendered by the absence of freedom. However all-powerful you are, what can you give to the world if you have been a slave for a thousand years?

The nineteenth century, however, seemed at last to have brought closer the time foretold by the Russian prophets, the time when Russia, always so receptive to other teachings and other examples, always so greedy to absorb other spiritual influences, was herself preparing to act on the world.

For a hundred years Russia had been drinking in a borrowed idea of freedom. For a hundred years—through the lips of Pestel, Ryleyev, Herzen, Chernyshevsky, Lavrov, Bakunin; through the lips of her writers; through the lips of such martyrs as Zhelyabov, Sofya Perovskaya, Timofey Mikhailov, and Kibalchich; through the lips of Plekhanov, Kropotkin, and Mikhailovsky; through the lips of Sazonov and Kalyaev; through the lips of Lenin, Martov, and Chernov; through the lips of her classless intelligentsia; through the lips of her students and progressive workers—for a hundred years Russia had been imbibing the work of the thinkers and philosophers of Western freedom. This thinking was carried by books, by university faculties, by young men

who had studied in Paris and Heidelberg. It was carried by the boots of Napoleon's soldiers. It was carried by engineers and enlightened merchants. It was carried by impoverished Westerners who came to Russia to work and whose sense of their own innate human dignity evoked the envious astonishment of Russian princes.

And so, fertilized by the ideas of freedom and of the dignity of man, the Russian Revolution ran its course.

And what did the Russian soul do with these Western ideas? How did she transform them within herself? Into what kind of crystal did she make them precipitate? What kind of shoot would she cause to spring from the subconscious of history?

"Russia, where are you rushing to?...She gives no answer."

Dozens, perhaps hundreds, of revolutionary teachings and creeds, leaders and parties, programs and prophecies came as suitors to the young Russia who had cast off the chains of tsarism. As they paraded before her, the captains of Russian progress gazed longingly, passionately and pleadingly into her face.

And then there they stood in a great circle—moderates, fanatics, laborists, populists, friends of the workers, advocates of the peasantry, liberal factory owners, light-seeking men of the church, crazy anarchists.

Invisible threads—ties that even they themselves were often unable to sense—bound these men to the ideals of Western parliaments and constitutional monarchies, to the ideals of erudite cardinals and bishops, to the ideals of factory owners and educated landowners, to the ideals of preachers, university professors, and trade-union leaders.

The slave girl's gaze, the great slave girl's searching, doubting, evaluating gaze came to rest on Lenin. It was him she chose.

As in an old tale, he guessed her hidden thought. He interpreted her perplexing dream, her innermost secret.

But is this truly what happened?

He became her chosen one not only because she chose him but also because he chose her.

She followed him because he promised her mountains of gold and rivers flowing with wine. She followed him, willingly at first, trusting him, along a merry, intoxicating path lit by the burning estates of landowners. Then she began to stumble, to look back, ever more terrified of the path now stretching before her—but the grip of the iron hand that led her was growing tighter and tighter.

And he, imbued with apostolic faith, walked on, leading Russia behind him, failing to realize that he had succumbed to a strange delusion. In Russia's obedient walk, in her renewed, postrevolutionary submissiveness, in her maddening pliancy, everything that he had brought her from the revolutionary, freedom-loving West was being transformed. Everything he had brought to Russia was drowning and perishing.

He believed that his unshakable, dictatorial power guaranteed that the ideal he believed in, the gift he had brought to his country, would be preserved in all its purity.

He rejoiced in this power. He identified it with the justice of his faith—and then, for one terrible moment, he realized that his unyielding strength as the leader of a country so gentle, a country so submissive and easily influenced, was really a supreme form of impotence.

And the tighter his grip, the sterner his stride, the more obedient Russia became to his educated and revolutionary violence—the less power Lenin possessed to struggle against the truly satanic force of Russia's serf past.

Like some thousand-year-old alcoholic solution, the principle of slavery in the Russian soul had only grown stronger. Like aqua regia, smoking from its own strength, it dissolved the metal and salt of human dignity, entirely changing the inner life of Russian man.

Throughout nine hundred years Russia's vast spaces—which appeared, on a superficial view, to have engendered a sweeping breadth of soul, a sense of daring and freedom—were no more than a mute alembic for slavery.

Throughout nine hundred years Russia appeared to be moving away from remote forest settlements, from smoke-filled huts without chimneys, from the distant hermitages of breakaway sects, from log palaces. Throughout nine hundred years Russia's future seemed to be a matter of the factories of the Urals, of the coal of the Donbass, of the Hermitage Museum and the stone palaces of Petersburg; it seemed to be embodied in powerful artillery, in the metal smiths and lathe operators of Tula, in frigates and steam hammers.

Everything seemed entirely clear; to a superficial observer, there could be no doubt that Russia was moving toward the West and growing in enlightenment.

But the more the surface of Russian life came to resemble the surface of Western life, the more evocative of Western life grew the roar of Russia's factories, the rattle of her carriages, the clickety-clack of her train wheels, the flapping sails of her ships and the crystal gleam of her palace windows—the deeper became the hidden abyss that separated the innermost essence of Russian life from that of Western life.

The evolution of the West was fertilized by the growth of freedom; Russia's evolution was fertilized by the growth of slavery. This is the abyss that divides Russia and the West.

The history of humanity is the history of human freedom. The growth of human potentiality is expressed, above all, in the growth of freedom. Freedom is not, as Engels claimed, "the recognition of necessity." Freedom is the direct opposite of necessity; freedom is necessity overcome. Progress, in essence, is the progress of human freedom. What is life itself, if not freedom? The evolution of life is the evolution of freedom.

Russia has always evolved in a peculiar way; what has evolved has been the degree of non-freedom. Year by year serfdom grew harsher and the peasants' right to their land more tenuous. Meanwhile, Russian science, technology, and learning continued to advance, merging with the growth of slavery.

The birth of Russian statehood was marked by the final enslavement of the peasantry; in 1497, Autumn Yuri's Day, November 26, the peasant's last day of freedom, was abolished. No longer could a peasant choose to move from one landlord to another.

After this, the number of free "wanderers" kept dwindling, the number of serfs continued to grow, and Russia began to make herself felt as a part of Europe. After being tied to the land, the peasant was then tied first to the owner of the land and then to the officials representing the State and the army. The landowner, meanwhile, was granted first the right to pass judgment on his serfs and then the right to subject them to "the Moscow torture" (as it was christened four centuries ago); this meant tying a man's hands behind his back, lifting him off the ground by his wrists, and beating him with a knout. And Russian metallurgy continued to progress; grain warehouses grew larger; the State and its army grew stronger; the world saw the dawn of Russian military glory; and literacy increased.

The remarkable work of Peter the Great, who laid the foundations of Russian scientific and industrial progress, involved an equally remarkable progress in the severity of serfdom. The serfs who worked the land were still further reduced in status—until they enjoyed no more rights than a landlord's household serfs; the few remaining "wanderers" were enserfed. Peter also enserfed the peasant farmers of the far north and of the southern and eastern frontiers. There was a similar increase in the burdens placed on the peasants owned by the State; this too was in the interests of Petrine enlightenment and progress. Peter believed that he was bringing Russia closer to the West—and that was indeed the case. But the abyss between freedom and non-freedom continued to grow.

Then came the dazzling age of Catherine the Great, the age of a wonderful flowering of Russian arts and Russian enlightenment—and the age when serfdom reached its highest development.

And so, Russian progress and Russian slavery were shackled together by a thousand-year-long chain. Every move forward toward the light only deepened the black pit of serfdom.

The nineteenth century, however, was a very special century for Russia.

This century shook the fundamental principle of Russian life: the link between progress and serfdom.

Russian revolutionary thinkers failed to appreciate the importance of the emancipation of the serfs in 1861. The emancipation of the serfs—as we can see from the history of the following century—was more truly revolutionary than the October Revolution. The emancipation of the serfs shook Russia's thousand-year-old foundation, a foundation that neither Peter the Great nor Lenin had so much as touched: the dependence of the country's evolution on the growth of slavery.

After the emancipation of the serfs, the revolutionary leaders, the students, and the intelligentsia fought violently, passionately, and with self-abnegation for a human dignity that Russia had never known, for progress without slavery. This new law was something entirely alien to Russian tradition, and no one knew what would become of Russia if she were to renounce the thousand-year link between her evolution and slavery. No one knew what would become of the Russian character.

In February 1917, the path of freedom lay open for Russia. Russia chose Lenin.

The destruction of Russian life carried out by Lenin was on a vast scale. Lenin destroyed the way of life of the landowners. Lenin destroyed merchants and factory owners.

Nevertheless, Lenin was fated by history. However bizarre this may sound, he was fated by Russian history to preserve Russia's old curse: this link between progress and non-freedom.

The only true revolutionaries are those who seek to destroy the very foundation of the old Russia: her slave soul.

And so it was that Lenin's obsession with revolution, his fanatical faith in the truth of Marxism and absolute intolerance of anyone who disagreed with him, all led him to further hugely the development of the Russia he hated with all his fanatical soul.

It is, indeed, tragic that a man who so sincerely loved Tolstoy and Beethoven should have furthered a new enslavement of the peasants and workers, that he should have played a central role in reducing to the status of lackeys—State lackeys—such outstanding figures of Russian culture as the writer Aleksey Tolstoy, the physical chemist Nikolay Semyonov, and the composer Dmitry Shostakovich.

The debate begun by the supporters of Russian freedom was finally resolved. Once again, Russian slavery proved invincible.

Lenin's victory became his defeat.

But Lenin's tragedy was not only a Russian tragedy. It became a tragedy for the whole world.

Did Lenin ever imagine the true consequences of his revolution? Did he ever imagine that it would not simply be a matter of Russia now leading the way—rather than, as had been predicted, following in the path of a socialist Europe? Did he ever imagine that what his revolution would liberate was Russian slavery itself—that his revolution would enable Russian slavery to spread beyond the confines of Russia, to become a torch lighting a new path for humanity?

Russia was no longer drinking in the spirit of freedom from the West. Instead the West was gazing in fascination at this Russian spectacle—of modernization through non-freedom.

The world saw the bewitching simplicity of this path. The world saw the strength of this People's State built upon non-freedom.

The words of Russia's prophets seemed to have been fulfilled.

But they were fulfilled in the strangest and most terrible of ways.

Lenin's synthesis of non-freedom and socialism stupefied the world more than the discovery of nuclear energy.

The European apostles of national revolutions saw the flame coming from the East. First the Italians and then the Germans began to develop the concept of national socialism in their own ways.

And the flame kept spreading. It was taken up by Asia and Africa.

Nations and States could develop in the name of power! They could develop in contempt of freedom!

This was not nourishment for the healthy. It was a narcotic for failures, for the sick and the weak, for the backward and beaten.

Through the will, passion, and genius of Lenin, Russia's thousand-year-old law of development became a worldwide law.

So history decreed.

Lenin's intolerance, his forcefulness, his intransigence in the face of disagreement, his contempt for freedom, the fanaticism of his faith, the cruelty he showed toward his enemies—all the qualities that brought victory to his cause were born and forged in the thousand-year-old depths of Russian slavery. That is why his victory served the cause of non-freedom. And in the meantime other aspects of Lenin did not cease to exist; the traits that have charmed millions, the traits of a kind, modest Russian working intellectual continued to exist—but they existed immaterially, without significance.

So. Is the Russian soul still as enigmatic as ever? No, there is no enigma.

Was there ever an enigma? What enigma can there be in slavery?

But is this really a specifically and uniquely Russian law of development? Can it truly be the lot of the Russian soul, and of the Russian soul alone, to evolve not with the growth of freedom but with the growth of slavery? Can this truly be the fate of the Russian soul?

No, no, of course not.

This law is determined by the parameters—and there are dozens, maybe even hundreds of such parameters—within which Russian history has unfolded.

"Soul" is neither here nor there; it simply does not come into it. If the French or the Germans, the Italians or the English, had been placed a thousand years ago within the same parameters of forest, steppe, bog, and plain, in the force field between Europe and Asia, amid Russia's tragic vastness, then the pattern of their history would have been no different from that of Russian history. Anyway, it is not only the Russians who have known this path. There are many people on every continent of this Earth who have come to know the bitterness of the Russian path—some of them only vaguely and from a distance, some of them closely and clearly, suffering bitterness of their own.

It is time for the students and diviners of Russia to understand that the mystique of the Russian soul is simply the result of a thousand years of slavery.

And in admiration of the Byzantine purity and Christian meekness of the Russian soul there lies an involuntary recognition of the inviolability of Russian slavery. The sources of this Christian meekness and Byzantine ascetic purity are the same as the sources of Lenin's passion, intolerance, and fanatical faith—they lie in the thousand years of Russian serfdom, Russian nonfreedom.

And this is why the Russian prophets were so tragically mistaken. Where, where can we find this "Russian soul, all-human and all-unifying"—that Dostoevsky told us would "speak the final word of the great general harmony, of the final brotherly concord of all tribes according to the law of the Gospel of Christ"?

Where indeed, O Lord, is this all-human and all-unifying soul to be found? Did the prophets of Russia ever imagine that their prophecies about the coming universal triumph of the Russian soul would find their fulfillment in the unified grating and grinding of the barbed wire stretched around Auschwitz and the labor camps of Siberia?

Lenin was in many ways opposed to the great prophets of Russia. He is infinitely far from their ideals of meekness, of Christian, Byzantine purity and the laws of the Gospel. But he is also strangely and surprisingly close to these prophets. While going his own very different way, he made no effort to save Russia from her thousand-year-old quagmire of non-freedom. Like them, he recognized Russian slavery as something unshakable. Like them, he was born of our non-freedom.

The Russian slave soul lives both in Russian faith and in Russian lack of faith, both in Russian meek love of humanity and in the Russian propensity to reckless violence. It lives in Russian miserliness and philistinism, in Russian obedient industriousness, in Russian ascetic purity, in the Russian capacity for fraud on a supreme scale, in the redoubtable braveness of Russian warriors, in the Russian lack of any sense of human dignity, in the frenzy of Russian sectarians, and in the desperate ferocity with which Russian rebels rebel. The Russian slave soul is manifest in Lenin's revolution, in Lenin's passionate embrace of Western revolutionary teachings, in Lenin's fanaticism, in Lenin's violence, and in the victories of the Leninist State.

Wherever slavery exists in the world, it gives birth to souls of the same kind.

What hope is there for Russia if even her great prophets were unable to distinguish freedom from slavery?

What hope is there for Russia if her geniuses see submissive slavery as the expression of the meek, bright beauty of her soul?

What hope is there for Russia if Lenin, the man who did most to transform her, did not destroy but only strengthened the tie between Russian progress and Russian non-freedom?

When will we see the day of a free, human, Russian soul? When will this day dawn?

Or will it never dawn?

Lenin died. But Leninism did not die. Lenin's party did not let go of the power that Lenin had won. Lenin's comrades, helpers, and disciples continued his work.

> The men he left behind
> Must bind with concrete dikes
> Lands overwhelmed by flood.
> No grief can make them pause;
> They don't cry, "Lenin's died."
> They execute his laws;
> And still more sternly carry on his cause.

Lenin bequeathed Russia many things: the dictatorship of the Party, the Red Army, the militia, the Cheka, the campaign against illiteracy, the special educational faculties for the workers. He also left twenty-eight volumes of his Collected Works...Who then among Lenin's comrades would prove best able to absorb the innermost essence of Leninism and express it through his heart and mind, through his whole way of being? Who would take up Lenin's banner and carry it further? Who would finish building the vast State whose foundations Lenin had laid? Who would lead his "party of a new type" from victory to victory? Who would consolidate the new order?

Would it be the brilliant, impetuous, magnificent Trotsky? The charming Bukharin, with his talent for theory and generalization? The ox-eyed Rykov, the practical-minded statesman who most closely identified with the true interests of the people, of the workers and peasants? The well-educated, self-confident Kamenev, with his sophistication, with his grasp of affairs of state, with his ability to come out victorious from Party conventions and their complex battles? Would it be Zinoviev, the internationally respected polemicist, with his understanding of the international workers' movement?

The character, the spirit of each of these men was in harmony with one facet or another of Lenin's character. But not with the facets that proved fundamental, not with the facets that determined the essence of the new world that was coming into being.

Fate willed it that all the aspects of Lenin's character expressed in the character of Trotsky, who was so nearly a genius—or in the characters of Bukharin, Rykov, Kamenev, or Zinoviev—turned out to be seditious. They led these men to the scaffold, to their death.

These character traits, far from expressing Lenin's essence, were signs of his weakness, his eccentricity, his seditiousness, his capacity for self-delusion. The essence of the new lay elsewhere.

In the Lenin who loved the *Appassionata* and *War and Peace*, there was, after all, something of Lunacharsky. But it was not for poor old Lunacharsky to "execute his laws" and "sternly carry on his cause." Nor did history choose Trotsky, Bukharin, Rykov, Kamenev, or Zinoviev to express what was innermost and most essential in Lenin.

Stalin's hatred for the Old Bolsheviks who opposed him was also a hatred for those aspects of Lenin's character that contradicted what was most essential in Lenin.

Stalin executed Lenin's closest friends and comrades-in-arms because they were all, each in his own way, hindering the realization of the main goal—of true Leninism.

Struggling against them, executing them, it was as if he were struggling against Lenin, executing Lenin. But, by doing this, he was also victoriously affirming Lenin and Leninism, raising Lenin's banner over Russia and securing it there.

The name of Stalin is inscribed for all eternity in the history of Russia.

By looking at Stalin, postrevolutionary Russia came to know herself.

The twenty-eight volumes of Lenin's Collected Works—speeches, reports, programmes, economic and philosophical studies—did not help Russia to know herself and her fate. The result of confusing Western revolution and Russian ways of life was a chaos greater than that of the Tower of Babel.

It was not only the Russian peasants and workers, not only Budyonny's cavalry and the Red Sailors, who were unable to grasp what was really happening; in this respect, Lenin himself was equally helpless. The roar of the revolutionary storm, the laws of the materialist dialectic, the logic of *Das Kapital* —these blended with the whoops of accordions, anarchist street songs like "Little Apple" and "The Fried Chicken," the hum of moonshine distilleries, and the appeals of Bolshevik propagandists to Petrograd sailors and students attending the new workers' faculties, urging them to resist the poisonous heresies of Kautsky, Cunow, and Hilferding.

The wild violence—the arson and rioting that gripped the entire country—brought to the surface of the Russian cauldron all the grievances that had accumulated over the centuries of serfdom.

From the romanticism of the Revolution, from the craziness of *Proletkult* , from the headiness of peasant rebellion and Green Armies fueled on moonshine, from the fury of the Bolshevik sailors during the battle for Odessa, there emerged a new police chief—a more powerful police chief than Russia had ever seen.

The peasantry passionately aspired to be the master of the land that it plowed. This desire, which Lenin understood and encouraged, presented a danger to the State that Lenin had founded. Peasant ownership of the land was incompatible with the very existence of this State. The State therefore dealt ruthlessly with this aspiration.

In 1930 the State founded by Lenin would become the sole and indivisible owner of all the lands, forests, and waters of the Soviet Union. No longer would the peasantry have the right to own plowland.

During the years after the Revolution, however, a fog of confusion and contradiction reigned not only in docks and railway junctions, not only on the crowded roofs of trains that were overflowing with people, not only in the aspirations of peasants and the inflamed minds of poets. There was no less confusion in the field of revolutionary theory, in the stupefying contradictions between Lenin's crystal-clear theses and what was actually happening.

Lenin's fundamental slogan in 1917 was "All Power to the Soviets!" It is entirely clear, however, that Lenin's soviets have never possessed any power whatsoever. They have always been of secondary importance to the Party, their function either merely administrative or entirely formal.

The young Lenin devoted all his energies to the struggle against The People's Will and the Socialist Revolutionaries; the aim of all this zealous theorizing was to prove that Russia could not bypass the capitalist stage of development. But in 1917 Lenin devoted his energies to proving that Russia, bypassing capitalism and its attendant democratic freedoms, could and should take the path of proletarian revolution.

Could Lenin have imagined that by founding the Communist International and by proclaiming at its Second Congress the slogan of world revolution, "Proletarians of the World Unite!" he was preparing the ground for an unprecedented growth of the principle of national sovereignty?

The power of State nationalism and the crazed nationalism of people deprived of freedom and of their human dignity determined the history of the twentieth century. They became the main lever, the thermonuclear warhead of a new order.

Stalin taught Russia to think straight, to put the turmoil of October and Lenin behind her. A reprimand for everyone or—as the saying has it—"earrings for every sister." Or, if you were deemed unworthy of this, your earrings were torn off—along with your ears, if not your head.

The Bolshevik Party was destined to become the Party of a national State. This fusion of Party and State found its expression in the person of Stalin. In the mind and will of Stalin, the State expressed its own mind and will.

It seemed as if Stalin was constructing the Russian State—the State founded by Lenin—in his own image and likeness. In reality, however, it was the other way around. Stalin's image was the likeness of the Russian State—which is why he became Tsar.

Although there appear to have been times—and especially toward the end of his life—when Stalin saw the State as his servant.

It was Stalin—who was both a European Marxist and an Asian despot—who gave true expression to the nature of Soviet statehood. What was embodied in Lenin was a Russian national principle; what was embodied in Stalin was a statehood that was both Russian and Soviet.

Russian statehood, engendered by Asia but dressed in European clothes, is a supra-historical phenomenon. Its principles are universal and unshakable, applicable to all the structures that Russia has known during the thousand years of her history. With Stalin's help, all the revolutionary categories that Lenin had seen as a temporary, necessary expedient—dictatorship, terror, the suppression of bourgeois freedoms—were transformed into the essence, into the very foundation of Soviet life. Fusing with Russia's thousand-year-old

tradition of non-freedom, these categories became the essential content of the Soviet State. The remaining vestiges of Social Democracy, in the meantime, were relegated to the realm of stage decor, of mere external form.

Stalin united within him all the most ruthless traits of slave Russia.

In Stalin's improbable cruelty and perfidy, in his capacity for pretense and hypocrisy, in his resentfulness and vindictiveness, in his coarseness, in his humor—we see a lordly Asiatic.

In Stalin's knowledge of revolutionary doctrines, in his use of the terminology of the progressive West, in his familiarity with the works of literature and theater dear to the Russian democratic intelligentsia, in his quotations from Gogol and Saltykov-Shchedrin, in his mastery of the subtlest and most complex conspiratorial tricks, in his amorality—we see a revolutionary in the model of Nechaev, one for whom any means are justified by the future end. But Nechaev himself would, of course, have shuddered if he had known to what extremes Iosif Stalin would take the principles of *Nechaevism.*

In Stalin's faith in official documents and the supremacy of police power, in his passion for medals and uniforms, in his unparalleled contempt for human dignity, in his deification of order and a rigid bureaucracy, in his readiness to kill those who have infringed some holy letter of the law and then to flout this same law as he himself carried out some act of monstrous violence—we see a police boss, a top gendarme.

Stalin was a fusion of these three figures.

And it was these three Stalins who created the Stalinist State—a State bordering both cruel, treacherous, vengeful, hypocritical Asia and enlightened, democratic, mercantile, mercenary Europe; a State in which law is simply a weapon of tyranny and in which tyranny is the law; a State whose roots reach far back into the centuries of Russian serfdom, which made slaves of the peasants, and into the centuries of the Tatar yoke, which made slaves even of those who lorded it over the peasants.

This Asiatic in kid boots, quoting Saltykov-Shchedrin, skillfully employing the vocabulary of revolution while he lived by the laws of tribal vengeance, brought clarity into the postrevolutionary chaos. And he expressed himself—he realized his own character—through the character of the State.

The most important principle of the State he constructed is that it is a State without freedom.

In this country, huge factories, artificial seas, canals, and hydroelectric power stations do not serve people; they serve a State without freedom.

In this State a man cannot sow what he wants to sow. A man is not the master of the field on which he works; he is not the owner of the apple trees he grows or of the milk he produces. Whatever the earth bears, it bears according to the instructions of the State without freedom.

In this State not only are the national minorities deprived of their freedom but so is the Russian nation itself. Where there is no individual freedom, there can be no national freedom—since national freedom is, above all, the freedom of the individual human being.

In this State there is no such thing as society. Society is founded on people's free intimacy and free antagonism—and in a State without freedom, free intimacy and free hostility are unthinkable.

The thousand-year-old principle nurtured by the Russia of the boyars, by Ivan the Terrible, by Peter the Great and Catherine the Great, the principle according to which Russian enlightenment, science, and industrial power develop by virtue of a general increase in the degree of human non-freedom—this principle achieved its most absolute triumph under Stalin.

And it is truly astonishing that Stalin, after so totally destroying freedom, continued to be afraid of it.

Perhaps it was this fear that caused Stalin to display such an astonishing degree of hypocrisy.

Stalin's hypocrisy was a clear expression of the hypocrisy of his State. And it was expressed, first and foremost, in his demand that people play at being free. The State did not openly spit on the corpse of freedom—certainly not! Instead, after the precious, living, radioactive content of freedom and democracy had been done away with, this corpse was turned into a stuffed dummy, into a shell of words. It was like the way savages, after getting their hands on the most delicate of sextants and chronometers, use them as jewelry.

The freedom that had been done away with became an adornment of the State—but not, in fact, a useless adornment. This dead freedom became the lead actor in a piece of theater on a gigantic scale. The State without freedom created a mock parliament; it created mock elections, mock trade unions, a mock society, and a mockery of social life. In this State without freedom mock groupings of every kind—mock collective-farm administrations, mock governing boards of writers' and artists' unions, mock presidiums of district and provincial executive committees, mock bureaus, and mock plenums of district, provincial, and central committees of national Communist parties—held discussions and passed resolutions that had already been resolved; they took decisions that had already been taken elsewhere. Even the presidium of the Party Central Committee was no more than theater.

This theater reflected Stalin's nature. And it reflected the nature of the State without freedom. That is why the State needed Stalin, a man whose character fitted him to bring out the character of the State.

What was real— *really* real, and not theater? Who *really* made decisions—and did not merely appear to make them?

The real power was Stalin. The decisions were made by him. But he could not, of course, personally decide every question—whether Semyonova should be granted a holiday from teaching, whether the Dawn collective farm should plant peas or cabbages.

The principle of the State without freedom did, in fact, require exactly this: that Stalin should make every decision himself, without exception. This, however, was physically impossible, and so questions of secondary importance were decided by Stalin's trusted agents. And they always decided them in the same way—in the spirit of Stalin.

That indeed is why they were Stalin's agents, or the agents of his agents. The decisions made by them had one thing in common: whether these decisions related to the construction of a hydroelectric power station in the lower reaches of the Volga or to the possibility of a milkmaid called Anyuta Feoktistova being sent on a two-month course of study, they were made in the spirit of Stalin. The spirit of Stalin and the spirit of the State were, after all, identical.

It was always easy, at any congress, meeting, or briefing of any kind, to recognize the trusted agents of Stalin-and-the-State. They were people whom no one argued with; they spoke, after all, in the name of Stalin-and-the-State.

That the State without freedom always acted in the name of freedom and democracy, that the State was afraid to take a step without invoking the name of freedom and democracy, bears witness to the strength of freedom. There were few people whom Stalin feared, but he feared freedom constantly; he feared it to the end of his life. After killing it, he fawned on its corpse.

It is wrong to see what happened during collectivization and during the Purges simply as a senseless expression of cruelty, simply as a senseless expression of the unlimited power possessed by a single man.

In reality, the bloodshed of 1930 and 1937 was necessary to the State. As Stalin himself said, this blood was not shed for nothing. Without it, the State would not have survived. It was non-freedom that brought about the bloodshed, in order to conquer freedom. And it all began long before, under Lenin.

It was not only in politics and public activity that freedom was overcome. Freedom was overcome everywhere, from the realm of agriculture—the peasants' loss of the right to sow freely and harvest freely—to the realms of poetry and philosophy. It is the same whether we are talking about shoemaking, the choice of reading matter, or moving from one apartment to another; in every sphere of life, freedom was overcome. It was the same with regard to factory work: work norms, pay, safety measures—all depended on the will of the State.

From the Pacific Ocean to the Black Sea, non-freedom triumphed—everywhere and in everything. Everywhere and in everything, freedom was killed.

It was a victorious offensive, and it could never have been carried out without a great deal of bloodshed. Freedom, after all, is life; to overcome freedom, Stalin had to kill life.

Stalin's character found expression in the vast projects of the Five-Year Plans. These thundering twentieth-century pyramids corresponded to the grandiose palaces and monuments of Asiatic antiquity that so captivated his soul. Mankind had no more need of Stalin's vast constructions than God needed those vast temples and mosques.

Stalin's character found especially vivid expression in the work of the security organs he created.

Interrogations under torture; the destruction wrought by Ivan the Terrible's *oprichniki* , who were called upon to destroy not only individuals but whole social classes; police methods introduced by Malyuta Skuratov and further developed by Count Benckendorff—all these found their equivalents in Stalin's soul, and in the work of the apparatus of repression that he created.

But a still more sinister phenomenon was the conjunction, in Stalin's soul, of the Russian revolutionary tradition with the no less Russian tradition of a powerful secret police force operating without restraint. This conjunction—which became part of Stalin's nature and was reflected in the security organs that he created—also had its historical prototype.

It is the fateful association of Degaev—an intellectual, a prominent member of The People's Will, and, eventually, a double agent—with Colonel Sudeikin, head of the tsarist Secret Police, an association that occurred when Stalin was still only a little boy, that most clearly represents this prototype.

Sudeikin was intelligent and skeptical. He knew a great deal about the power of revolutionary Russia and he was no less aware of the pathetic incompetence of his masters, the Tsar and his ministers, whom he observed with sardonic amusement. In his capacity of secret policeman, he made use of Degaev. Degaev was thus working at one and the same time for the Revolution and for the Secret Police.

Sudeikin failed. His aim had been first to encourage the revolutionaries, then to forge false cases against them. With the help of the Revolution he would intimidate the Tsar, seize the reins of power himself, and become a dictator. Having won supreme power, he would then annihilate the Revolution. But his bold dreams were never realized—he was assassinated by Degaev.

Stalin, however, succeeded. And Stalin's triumph contained within it—somewhere hidden from everyone, somewhere hidden even from his own self—the triumph of Sudeikin's dream. Sudeikin had dreamed of harnessing two horses—revolution and the secret police—to one cart; Stalin had realized this dream.

Stalin, who had been born of the Revolution, did away with the Revolution and the revolutionaries once and for all—with the help of the Secret Police.

Perhaps the persecution mania that so tormented Stalin was born of fear—the same secret fear that Sudeikin had felt with regard to Degaev.

Apparently obedient, apparently harnessed to the work of the *Third Section,* Degaev had continued to inspire

terror in the police colonel. But what was far more terrifying was that both of these men—friends, enemies, mutual betrayers—had remained alive in the cramped darkness of Stalin's soul.

And it is perhaps here, or hereabouts, that we can find an explanation for one of the questions that most bewildered people in 1937. Why was it necessary, in the course of destroying innocent people who were devoted to the Revolution, to elaborate detailed scenarios, false from beginning to end, of their involvement in entirely imaginary, nonexistent conspiracies?

By torturing them for days, weeks, months, and sometimes even whole years, the security organs compelled poor, tormented accountants, engineers, and agronomists to take part in theatrical productions, to play the roles of villains, foreign agents, terrorists, and saboteurs.

To what purpose? Millions of people have asked themselves this question millions of times.

Sudeikin, after all, organized his theatrical productions in order to deceive the Tsar. But Stalin did not need to deceive the Tsar; he *was* the Tsar.

Yes, yes, of course...But all the same, Stalin *was* trying to deceive the Tsar. He was trying, through his theatrical productions, to deceive a Tsar who, in spite of everything, against Stalin's own will, still lived in the secret dark of his soul. An invisible sovereign was still living there—an invisible sovereign was still living in all the places where non-freedom appeared to have triumphed undisputedly. Stalin was terrified of this Tsar, and of this Tsar alone, until the end of his days.

Stalin was unable, in spite of all the millions he killed, to do away with freedom. He was unable, until the end of his days, to do away with the freedom in whose name the February Revolution had flared up.

And so the Asiatic despot living in Stalin's soul tried to deceive freedom. Despairing of doing away with freedom once and for all, he tried to outwit freedom, to pull the wool over the eyes of freedom.

Just as Lenin's work did not die in 1924, so Stalin's work lived on after his death.

The State without freedom, the State built by Stalin, still lives. The apparatus of power—heavy industry, the armed forces, the security organs—is still in the grip of the Party. Non-freedom still reigns, unshakable, from the Pacific Ocean to the White and the Black seas. Theater still penetrates every aspect of life. There is still the same system of elections; the workers' unions are as shackled as ever; the peasants are still without internal passports, without even the freedom to move; the intelligentsia of a great country—still producing talented work—is still confined to the servants' room, from where one can hear the hum of its chatter. Government is still simply a matter of issuing commands, of pressing on buttons, and the power of the supreme controller is still unlimited.

Much, of course, has changed—inevitably and irrevocably.

The State without freedom has entered its third phase. It was founded by Lenin. It was constructed by Stalin. And now phase three has begun: the State, as an engineer might say, has been put into operation.

Much that was necessary during the period of construction has ceased to be necessary. The time to demolish the little old houses that happened to stand on the site of the new building has passed; the time to destroy or deport the inhabitants of all the old dwellings has passed.

The new skyscraper is inhabited by new tenants. There are, of course, still imperfections, but there is no need to go on employing the extermination methods of the late, great builder, the old boss.

The skyscraper's foundation—non-freedom—is as unshakable as ever.

What will come next? Is this foundation really so unshakable?

Was Hegel right? Can everything that is real really be rational? Is the inhuman real? Is the inhuman rational?

The power of the people's revolution that began in February 1917 was so great that not even the dictatorial State was able to stifle it. And while the State was proceeding, for its own sake, down its cruel and terrible path of growth and accumulation, it was, without knowing it, bearing freedom within its womb.

In deep darkness, in deep secrecy, freedom was coming to be. A river that swept away everything in its path, a river that had become the one reality for everyone, was thundering across the earth's surface. The new national State that was the sovereign of every living breath and the sole owner of countless treasures—of factories, of nuclear reactors, of every last field in the country—was celebrating its victory. The Revolution seemed to have taken place solely for the sake of this State, for the sake of its thousand years of triumphant power. Nevertheless, the sovereign of half the world was not simply a gravedigger of freedom.

In spite of the genius of Lenin, the inspired creator of a new world, freedom was coming to be. In spite of the limitless, cosmic violence of Stalin, freedom was coming to be. It was coming to be because human beings were still human beings.

It was man who carried out the revolution of February 1917; it was man who constructed skyscrapers, factories, and nuclear reactors at the new State's command—and there is no way out for man but freedom. Because even while constructing a new world, human beings remained human beings.

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Ivan Grigoryevich felt and understood all of this—sometimes clearly, sometimes vaguely.

No matter how vast the skyscrapers and powerful the cannon, no matter how limitless the power of the State, no matter how mighty the empire, all this is only mist and fog and—as such—will be blown away. Only one true force remains; only one true force continues to evolve and live; and this force is liberty. To a man, to live means to be free. No, not everything that is real is rational. Everything inhuman is senseless and useless.

It did not surprise Ivan Grigoryevich that the word "freedom" had been on his lips when he was sent to Siberia as a young student, and that this word was still alive in him, still present in his mind, even today.

He was alone in the room, but in his mind, in his thoughts, he was talking to Anna Sergeyevna:

"Do you know? At the very worst times I used to imagine being embraced by a woman. I used to imagine this embrace as something so wonderful that it would make me forget everything I had been through. It would be as if none of it had ever happened. But it turns out that it's you I have to talk to, that it's you I have to tell about the very worst time of all. You yourself, after all, talked all through that night. Happiness, it turns out, will be to share with you the burden I can't share with anyone else—the burden I can share only with you. When you come back from the hospital, I'll tell you about that hardest hour. It was a conversation in a prison cell, at dawn, after an interrogation. One of my cell mates—he's no longer alive, he died soon afterward—was called Aleksey Samoilovich. I think he was the most intelligent man I've ever met. But he frightened me, I found his mind very frightening. Not because it was evil—an evil mind is not really frightening. His mind wasn't evil, but indifferent and mocking; he mocked faith. He appalled me but, more important, he also attracted me. It was as if I were being sucked in, and I could do nothing about it. I couldn't make him share my faith in freedom.

"His life had gone badly for him, but then there was nothing particularly special about it. It was no different from the lives of many other people. He had been accused of spreading anti-Soviet propaganda—Article 58, Section 10, the most common accusation of all.

"But he had a powerful mind. The flow of his thoughts was like a great wave. Sometimes it would sweep me away. Sometimes I would tremble, as the earth can tremble when a wave breaks.

"I was brought back to my cell after being interrogated. What a list one could make of techniques of violence: burning at the stake, prisons, today's prison fortresses the size of a provincial capital, and the labor camps themselves. The original instruments of capital punishment were a hemp rope and a club that crushed your head; nowadays, though, an executioner just turns on the master switch and does away with a hundred, or a thousand, or ten thousand people. There's no need now to raise an ax. Our age is an age of supreme violence on the part of the State—supreme violence against the individual human being. But in this lies our strength and our hope. It is the twentieth century that has shaken Hegel's principle of the rationality of the world historical process, of the rationality of everything that is real. After decades of troubled debate, nineteenth-century Russian thinkers came to accept this principle, but now, at the height of the State's triumph over human freedom, Russian thinkers in padded camp jackets are overturning Hegel's principle and proclaiming *this* supreme principle of universal history: 'All that is inhuman is senseless and useless.'

"Yes, yes, yes, at this time of the total triumph of inhumanity it has become clear that everything created by violence is senseless and useless. It exists without a future; it will leave no trace.

"This is my faith, and with it I returned to my cell. And Aleksey Samoilovich said, as he often did, 'Why try to defend freedom? Long ago it was indeed seen as the law of progress, the meaning of progress. Now, however, it's entirely clear that there is no such thing as historical evolution. History is simply a molecular process. Man is always equal to himself, and there is nothing that can be done with him. There is no evolution. There is one very simple law, the law of the conservation of violence. It's as simple as the law of the conservation of energy. Violence is eternal, no matter what is done to destroy it. It does not disappear or diminish; it can only change shape. It can be embodied in slavery, or in the Mongol invasion. It wanders from continent to continent. Sometimes it takes the form of class struggle, sometimes of race struggle. From the sphere of the material it slips into religiosity, as in the Middle Ages. Sometimes it is directed against colored people, sometimes against writers and artists, but, all in all, the total quantity of violence on earth remains constant. Thinkers mistake its constant chaotic transformations for evolution and search for its laws. But chaos knows no laws, no evolution, no meaning, and no aim. Gogol, our Russian genius, sang of a flying *troika*—and in the flight of this *troika* he saw Russia's future. Russia's future, however, turned out to lie not in Gogol's *troika* of horses but in our faceless Soviet *troikas*: in the NKVD *troikas* that sentence men to be shot, in the village *troikas* that compiled lists of kulaks, in the *troikas* that expelled young people from universities, in the troikas that denied ration cards to an old woman they considered a "former" person.'

"There this man was, sitting on the bedboards, shaking an admonitory finger at Gogol: 'You got it wrong, Nikolay Vasilyevich, you didn't understand our Russian *troika*, you didn't see it clearly enough. Human history is not a matter of flying *troikas* but of chaos, of the eternal transformation of one kind of violence into another. The *troika* flies, but everything round about is motionless and frozen. Man, above all, is motionless; his fate is motionless. Violence is eternal, no matter what is done to destroy it. And the *troika* flies on—and what does it care about Russian grief? And what does Russian grief care about the *troika*? What does Russian grief care whether the *troika* is flying or whether it's come to a standstill?

"'And in any case it's not Gogol's troika signing death warrants somewhere here in this building but our very own *troika* —our very own NKVD troika.'

"And I'm lying half dead on the bedboards, and the only thing alive in me is my faith: my belief that human history is the history of freedom, of the movement from less freedom to more freedom; my belief that the history of life—from the amoeba to the human race—is the history of freedom, of the movement from less

freedom to more freedom; my belief that life itself is freedom. And this faith gives me strength, and I keep turning over in my mind a precious, luminous, and wonderful thought that has been hidden in our prison rags. As if with my hands, I keep exploring this thought: 'All that is inhuman is senseless and useless.'

"Aleksey Samoilovich hears me out, half alive as I am, and says, 'That's just a comforting lie. The history of life is the history of violence triumphant. Violence is eternal and indestructible. It can change shape, but it does not disappear or diminish. Even the word "history," even the concept of history is just something people have dreamed up. There's no such thing as history. History is milling the wind; history is grinding water with a pestle and mortar. Man does not evolve from lower to higher. Man is as motionless as a slab of granite. His goodness, his intelligence, his degree of freedom are motionless; the humanity in humanity does not increase. What history of humanity can there be if man's goodness always stands still?'

"And, you know, it felt as if nothing in the world can be worse than all this. I'm lying on the bedboards and, dear God, I start to feel an anguish that is more than I can bear—all from talking to one very clever man. It feels like death, like an execution. Even breathing feels more than I can bear. I want only one thing: not to see, not to hear, not to breathe. To die. But relief came from a quite unexpected direction. I was dragged off again to be interrogated. They didn't give me time to get my breath back. And I felt better, I felt relieved. Freedom, I knew again, is inevitable. To hell with troikas that fly, thunder, and sign death warrants. Freedom and Russia will be united!

"You can't hear me. When will you come back to me from the hospital?"

On a winter's day Ivan Grigoryevich accompanied Anna Sergeyevna to the cemetery. He did not have the chance to share with her all that he had recalled, all that he had thought through, all that he had noted down during the months of her illness.

He took all her things to the village, spent a day with Alyosha, and returned to the workshop.

27

In the summer Ivan Grigoryevich traveled to the seaside town where, beneath a green hill, his father's house had stood.

The train went right along the shore. During a short stop, Ivan Grigoryevich got out and looked at the green-and-black water. It was always moving, and it smelled cool and salty.

The wind and the sea had been there when the investigator summoned him for interrogations during the night. They had been there while a grave was being dug for a prisoner who had died in transit. They had been there while guard dogs barked beneath the barrack windows and the snow creaked beneath the boots of the guards.

The sea was eternal, and the eternity of its freedom seemed to Ivan Grigoryevich to be akin to indifference. The sea had not cared about Ivan Grigoryevich when he was living beyond the Arctic Circle, nor would its thundering, splashing freedom care about him when he ceased to live. No, he thought, this is not freedom. This is astronomical space come down to earth, a splinter of eternity, indifferent, always in motion.

The sea was not freedom; it was a likeness of freedom, a symbol of freedom...How splendid freedom must be if a mere likeness of it, a mere reminder of it, is enough to fill a man with happiness.

After passing the night in the station, he set off early in the morning toward the house. An autumn sun was rising in a cloudless sky, and it was impossible to distinguish it from a spring sun.

The silence around him was deserted and sleepy. He felt such an intensity of emotion that it seemed as if his heart, which had endured everything, would be unable to endure it. The world became divinely still; the dear sanctuary of his childhood was eternal and immutable. His feet had long ago trodden these cool cobbles; his child's eyes had gazed at these rounded hills now touched by the red rust of autumn. He listened to the noise of the stream, on its way to the sea amid watermelon rinds, gnawed corncobs, and other town detritus.

An old Abkhazian man, wearing a black sateen shirt girded by a thin leather belt, was carrying a basket of chestnuts toward the bazaar.

Ivan Grigoryevich might perhaps, in his childhood, have bought figs and chestnuts from this same unchanging old graybeard. And it was the same southern morning air—both cool and warm, smelling of the sea and of the mountain sky, of roses and of garlic from the kitchens. And the same little houses with closed shutters and drawn curtains. And behind these shutters were sleeping the same children—children who had never grown up—and the same old men as forty years ago, still not gone to their graves.

He came out onto the main road and began to climb the hill. There was the sound of the stream again. Ivan Grigoryevich could remember its voice.

Never before had he seen his life as a whole—but now here it was, lying there before him.

And, seeing his life, he felt no resentment toward anyone.

All of them—those who had prodded him with their rifle butts as they escorted him toward the investigator's office, those who had subjected him to long interrogations without letting him sleep, those who had said vile things about him at public meetings, those who had officially renounced him, those who had stolen his camp ration of bread, those who had beaten him—all of them, in their weakness, coarseness, and spite, had done evil without wanting to. They had not wanted to do evil to him.

They had betrayed, slandered, and renounced because there had been no other way for them to survive. And yet they were people; they were human beings. Had these people wanted him to be making his way like this to his abandoned home—old, alone, and without love?

People did not want to do evil to anyone, but they did evil all through their lives.

All the same, people were people, they were human beings. And the wonderful, marvelous thing is that, willingly or unwillingly, they did not allow freedom to die. In their terrible, distorted, yet still-human souls, even the most terrible of them looked after freedom and kept it alive.

He himself had achieved nothing. He would leave behind him no books, no paintings, no discoveries. He had created no school of thought, no political party, and he had no disciples.

Why had his life been so hard? He had not preached; he had not taught; he had simply remained what he had been since birth—a human being.

The mountainside opened out before him. From the other side of the pass appeared the tops of oak trees. He had walked there as a child, searching in the half dark of the forest for traces of the Circassians and their vanished life: fruit trees gone wild, remnants of what had once been a fence around a house.

Perhaps his own home would still be as unchanged as the town streets and the stream?

It would be at the next turn of the road. For a moment it seemed to him as if an improbably bright light, brighter than any light he had ever seen, had flooded the whole earth. A few more steps—and in this light he would see his home, and his mother would come out toward him, toward her prodigal son, and he would kneel down before her, and her young and beautiful hands would rest on his gray, balding head.

He saw thickets of thorns and hops. There was no house and no well—only a few stones shining white amid dusty grass that had been burned by the sun.

Here he stood—gray-haired, stoop-shouldered, yet still the same as ever, unchanged.

Notes

All-Union Central Council of Trade Unions By far the largest public organization in the Soviet Union, it served as an umbrella organization for the various individual trade unions.

did all the plowing An allusion to a proverbial fly who has been sitting for some time on the horn of an ox. When another fly asks him where he has been, he replies, “We’ve been plowing!”

makhorka The very coarsest, strongest tobacco.

first among equals During the nineteenth century these words were used with regard to the relationship between Russians and other Slav nationalities, especially Serbs. During and after the 1930s they were applied, semi-officially, to the relationship between Russians and other Soviet nationalities.

Vanya The most common affectionate form of Ivan.

candidate’s dissertation A *kandidatskaya dissertatsiya* is the equivalent of a PhD. A *doktorskaya dissertatsiya*, here translated as “doctorate,” is an even higher degree.

vitalism This is the doctrine that the functioning of a living organism is determined by a vital principle distinct from physicochemical forces. Such a way of thinking was, of course, unacceptable to the guardians of the “scientific materialism” that was the Soviet orthodoxy.

Killer Doctors On January 13, 1953, some of the most prominent doctors in the USSR were accused of taking part in a vast plot to poison members of the political and military leadership. *Pravda* reported the accusations under the headline VICIOUS SPIES AND KILLERS PASSING THEMSELVES OFF AS DOCTORS AND PROFESSORS . Stalin evidently intended these accusations to serve as a prelude to a vast purge of Jews. Only Stalin’s death, on March 5, 1953, prevented this purge from being carried out. The preparations for the affair of the Killer Doctors began at least a year in advance. Early in 1952, after the death in Moscow of the Mongolian dictator Marshal Choibalsan, Stalin said, “They die one after another. Shcherbakov, Zhdanov, Dimitrov, Choibalsan...die so quickly! We must change the old doctors for new ones.” Later that year, perhaps in response to this remark, Mikhail Ryumin, deputy minister for state security, alleged that the Jewish professor Yakov Etinger had, under the pretense of treating Zhdanov and Shcherbakov, set out to kill them. When his superior refused to believe the story, Ryumin went over his head directly to Stalin, who immediately suspected a wider conspiracy to kill off the Soviet leadership.

Short Course *The Short Course of the History of the All-Russian Communist Party (Bolshevik)* was published in 1938. Between then and 1953, more than forty-two million copies of the book were issued in sixty-seven languages. Most often referred to simply as *The Short Course*, it was seen as the encyclopedia of Marxism; it is notable for the frequency with which Lenin and Stalin are repeatedly mentioned in the same phrase, as if the two names were inseparable. Stalin supervised and heavily edited the work but himself contributed only one section of chapter 4, about dialectical and historical materialism. After the Second World War, however, he claimed sole authorship of the work.

All-Union Society for Cultural Ties with Foreign Countries The organization, founded in 1925, that was responsible for all cultural and scientific exchanges and contacts with other countries.

Khodynka A mass panic occurred on Khodynka Field in northwest Moscow during festivities following the coronation of Nicholas II, the last Russian Tsar. This resulted, according to official sources, in the death of 1,389 people.

the scroll of his life Grossman is alluding to a line from a short poem by Pushkin, “Memory” (1828): “Memory silently unrolls before me its long scroll.”

Lubyanka A large square in central Moscow where the headquarters of Soviet state security (regardless of its many changes of name) has been located since 1920. Like all headquarters buildings of the Soviet state security organizations, it contained an internal pre-trial prison, invisible from outside.

Moscow Trials A series of show trials of real and imagined political opponents of Stalin. The first trial, of Grigory Zinoviev, Lev Kamenev, and fourteen other Left Deviationists, was held in August 1936; all the defendants were sentenced to death. The second trial, in January 1937, was of seventeen lesser figures;

thirteen were shot and the remaining four sent to labor camps. The third trial, in March 1938, was of Nikolay Bukharin, former head of the Communist International; Aleksey Rykov, a former prime minister; and nineteen other Right Deviationists. All the leading defendants were executed. Andrey Vyshinsky was the chief prosecutor at all three trials. The most terrible year of Stalin's purges has always been seen as 1937, and this may have led Grossman to forget that the trial of Bukharin and Rykov was in fact held in early 1938.

weekly parcel of food The pay differential between members of the Soviet elite and ordinary workers was less than in most societies. For the main part, the elite received their payments in kind. One of their many privileges was to be provided regularly with food that it was impossible to obtain in ordinary shops.

War Communism The economic and political system that existed in Soviet Russia from 1918 to 1921. All industry was nationalized; all private enterprise was illegal; workers were shot for going on strike; grain and other products were requisitioned from the peasants for centralized distribution among the remaining population. The requisitioning of grain led to what was, in effect, a second civil war: the peasants grew less and less grain, and the Bolsheviks resorted to ever increasing violence in order to extort from the peasants what little grain they had grown. Together with the severe drought of 1921, this war between city and country resulted in a serious famine and the death of three to ten million peasants. After an uprising in March 1921 by sailors at the naval base of Kronstadt, Lenin made a tactical retreat, introducing the relatively liberal New Economic Policy, which lasted until 1928.

Higher Academic Council The panel of scientists then responsible, on behalf of the Academy of Sciences, for making decisions on appointments and higher degrees.

"Indians" Jacques Rossi, who spent time in the Gulag, writes: "A crowded barracks is hot, like in India, even during winter, and virtually everyone is half naked. Some are hot and others have lost all their clothes in card games." (*The Gulag Handbook* [New York: Paragon House, 1989], 141.)

the "thieves" and the "bitches." Russian criminals were in a position of considerable power in the camps, and they lorded it over the political prisoners. They referred to themselves as "thieves" and strictly observed a so-called thieves' code (*vorovskoy zakon*) that, among other things, strictly forbade any collaboration with the authorities. Thieves who violated this code and collaborated with the authorities were known as "bitches."

"engineer saboteurs" The first important show trial in Stalin's Soviet Union was the Shakhty Trial in 1928. A group of engineers in the north Caucasus town of Shakhty was accused of conspiring, with foreign support, to sabotage the Soviet economy. This marked the beginning of the use of accusations of sabotage —an accusation made only too often during the purges of the 1930s.

six-month city passport From late 1932 until the 1960s, collective-farm workers did not have the right to an internal passport. This meant that they had little more freedom of movement than they had had as serfs.

He washed the old man's feet From "The Grandfather" (1870) by Nikolay Nekrasov. The grandfather is one of the Decembrist rebels who, hoping to install a constitutional monarchy, took part in a failed coup against Nicholas I in December 1825. Like Ivan Grigoryevich, the grandfather has just returned from years of exile and forced labor in Siberia.

"without right of correspondence" During the purges, when a prisoner was executed, his relatives were usually told that he was being sentenced to "ten years without right of correspondence."

realm of form—during these last decades it has taken over the realm of content A key Stalinist axiom was that culture should be "national in form and Socialist in content." Nikolay Andreyevich is—very perceptively —pointing out that this principle has now been superseded.

Black Hundreds A reactionary, militantly antisemitic movement in Russia in the early twentieth century.

the Siege The Siege of Leningrad lasted from September 1941 to January 1943, when a narrow land corridor to the city was established. The siege, however, was not totally lifted until January 1944; it was one of the longest and most destructive sieges in history.

shared with two chance companions It was customary for drunks to gather in threesomes in alcohol shops, pay for a bottle of vodka together, and then share it on a park bench or in the main entrance of some nearby building.

laurel-crowned horseman *The Bronze Horseman* is the usual name for a famous equestrian statue of Peter the

Great, unveiled in 1782. Peter the Great sits heroically on horseback, his arm pointing toward the River Neva; his horse, rearing at the edge of a cliff, is trampling a serpent under its back hooves. *The Bronze Horseman* is also the title of one of Aleksandr Pushkin's masterpieces, a narrative poem written fifty years later, in 1833. The hero of this poem is Yevgeny, a young clerk whose sweetheart is drowned when the Neva overflows its banks. Yevgeny shakes his fist at *The Bronze Horseman* and curses Peter the Great for founding the city somewhere so vulnerable to flooding. The statue comes alive and chases Yevgeny through the city. The poem's central theme is the conflict between the needs of the State and the needs of ordinary citizens.

I have a passport That is, an "internal passport," which Ivan Grigoryevich would have received on his release.

classified as a kulak Peasants were classified as poor peasants (*bednyaki*), who had no property of their own; middle peasants (*serednyaki*), who owned property but did not employ hired labor; and rich peasants, or kulaks, who both owned property and employed hired labor. During collectivization, the kulaks were deported en masse. According to data from Soviet archives, more than 1.8 million kulaks and family members were deported in 1930 and 1931; nearly 500,000 of these appear to have died or escaped before reaching the camps or labor colonies that were their destination. Nearly 400,000 kulaks and family members are said to have died between 1932 and 1940.

"Push that which is falling!" A sarcastic allusion to Nietzsche: "But I say: what is falling, we should still push! Everything today—it is falling, it is falling apart: who would hold it up? but I—I would still push it..." (*Thus Spake Zarathustra*, translated by Thomas Wayne [New York: Algora Publishing, 2003], 161.)

stand "almost side by side" The learned informer is quoting a famous line of the Futurist poet Vladimir Vladimirovich Mayakovsky (1893–1930). In his "Jubilee Poem" written for the 125th anniversary of Pushkin's birth, Mayakovsky declares that, since his own name begins with *M* and Pushkin's with *P*, he and Pushkin will, in the eyes of posterity, be standing "almost side by side."

the word "Man" In the last act of Maksim Gorky's play *The Lower Depths*, Satin says: "M-A-N! That is magnificent! That has a...proud sound! We must respect man! Not pity him...not humilate him with pity. We must respect him!"

Intourist Throughout the Soviet Union all hotels, restaurants, and other facilities for tourists were managed by Intourist. Intourist restaurants were, on the whole, superior to other restaurants, and they were open only to foreigners and to members of the Soviet elite.

Tsarskoye Selo The small town outside Petersburg that, from the late eighteenth century, was the main summer residence of the Russian tsars.

application for a pension Soviet soldiers or officers taken prisoner by the Germans were considered suspect. Most of them were sent to the camps on their return to the Soviet Union. Widows only received pensions if there was documented evidence that their husbands had died on the battlefield. The Soviet defeats of the first months of the war were so swift, and so catastrophic, that such evidence was seldom recorded.

footcloths These were lengths of cloth wound around the foot and ankle. Throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth century these were far more common in Russia than socks or stockings. By the 1950s, however, they were less common, worn mainly in the army and in the camps.

Putilov Factory By 1917, this factory, which produced both artillery and rolling stock for the railways, was the largest in Petrograd. It had strong revolutionary traditions; a strike there in February 1917 was part of the chain of events that led to the February Revolution and the Tsar's abdication. After the October Revolution it produced the first Soviet tractors; after the assassination of Kirov in 1934, it was renamed the Kirov Factory.

sentenced under Article 58 That is, as a counterrevolutionary.

labor day A labor day is the equivalent of the average amount of work that—supposedly—could be performed by one person in the course of a working day. This amount of work—for example, plowing a hectare of land or threshing a ton of grain—would often, in fact, take several days to carry out. At the end of the season the income of the collective farm in money and kind was shared according to the number of labor days each member had to his credit. (Robert Conquest, *The Harvest of Sorrow* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1986], 176–77.)

a cook can govern the State Lenin was popularly believed to have said, "Every cook must learn to govern the State" or even "Every cook can govern the State." What Lenin in fact wrote, in an article published in

1917, “Will the Bolsheviks Retain Government Power?”, is more or less the opposite: “We know that an unskilled laborer or a cook cannot immediately get on with the job of state administration.”

quick-witted Newtons In his “Ode on the Anniversary of the Accession to the Throne of the Empress Elizaveta Petrovna” (1747), the poet Mikhail Lomonosov expresses the hope that the Russian Earth will give birth to “her own Platos and quick-witted Newtons.”

zeks People sentenced to a term in a labor camp were known as *zeks*, an abbreviated form of the word *zaklyuchenny*, meaning “someone who has been confined.”

Greens Participants in a peasant rebellion in the Tambov Province under the leadership of Aleksandr Antonov, a Socialist Revolutionary. At the rebellion’s peak in late 1920, the Green Army numbered as many as fifty thousand.

A vast world with its own language The best dictionary of camp language, Jacques Rossi’s *The Gulag Handbook*, runs to 610 pages.

even under armed guard Grossman wrote *Everything Flows* at a time when there was almost no reliable published information on such topics as the Gulag, Collectivization, and the Terror Famine. Given his dependence on oral sources, it is remarkable how little he has got wrong. Here, however, he seems to have been seduced by legend. There are references in Gulag memoirs to small groups of predatory female criminal convicts, and to men in some camps not seeing a woman for years, but I know of no other reference to camps where men never set foot.

chifir This is an ultra-strong tea (about fifty grams of tea per cup, and boiled rather than brewed). This was used as a narcotic and was greatly prized by the camp criminals.

remain faithful to illusions they had dreamed up Cf: “In the Kengir special camp, there were prisoners…who developed elaborate relationships with people they had never met. Some actually married one another across the wall that divided the men’s and women’s camps, without ever meeting in person. The woman stood on one side, the man on the other; vows were said, and a prisoner priest recorded the ceremony on a piece of paper.” (Anne Applebaum, *Gulag: A History of the Soviet Camps* [New York: Doubleday, 2003], p. 317.)

Butyrka A pre-trial investigative prison, the largest prison in Moscow. At the height of the purges around twenty thousand prisoners were kept there.

“58–6–12.” She has been sentenced under Article 58, Sections 6 and 12. Article 58 of the Soviet Criminal Code related to “counterrevolutionary activity” in general, Section 6 to “espionage,” and Section 12 to “failure to report counterrevolutionary activity.”

Arbat The name of an important street in central Moscow, and also of the fashionable, bohemian quarter around this street.

Mukha Clearly a nickname. The word means “a fly.”

camp barracks It is likely that much of Grossman’s information about women in the Gulag came from the philosopher Tatyana Nikolaevna Gornstein. Like Grossman, she was born in Berdichev. Arrested in 1937, she survived the camps thanks to her “privileged” work as a nurse in a camp hospital. She was released soon after Stalin’s death. Tatyana Menaker, a second cousin of Grossman, remembers Gornstein telling her about “the mathematicians, poets and philosophers who had begged her to preserve their manuscripts as they lay on camp beds dying from scurvy, diarrhoea and dysentery.” [Personal correspondence from Tatyana Menaker.]

Magadan The capital of Kolyma Province, an area of northeastern Siberia that was, in effect, one vast labor camp.

special settlements “The liquidation of the kulak as a class—dekulakization for short—was an integral component of collectivization and vital to its realization. Dekulakization was Stalin’s first Great Purge. It was a purge of the countryside: an endeavor to remove undesirable elements and to decapitate traditional village leadership and authority structures in order to break down village cohesion, minimize peasant resistance to collectivization, and intimidate the mass of the peasantry into compliance.” (Lynne Viola, *The Unknown Gulag* [New York: Oxford University Press, 2007], 7.) Special settlements were not—legally—a form of imprisonment, but they were under the direct control of the OGPU. They were often just areas of uninhabited forest where kulaks were dumped and told to build shelter for themselves. From 1933

their importance diminished as the importance of the network of labor camps increased.

we are all human beings Robert Conquest writes, "The Party's...rationale for everything done to the kulaks is summarized with exceptional frankness in a novel [by Ilya Ehrenburg] published in Moscow in 1934: 'Not one of them was guilty of anything; but they belonged to a class that was guilty of everything.'" (*The Harvest of Sorrow*, 143.)

all their pay went into special books They were therefore only able to spend their pay in particular shops.

'Dizziness from Success.' On March 2, 1930, Stalin published in *Pravda* an important article, "Dizziness from Success," that marked a partial and temporary retreat on his part.

they dug up vegetable gardens Robert Conquest writes, "Their technique consisted of beating people up and of using specially issued tools—steel rods about five-eighths of an inch in diameter and from three to ten feet long, with a handle at one end and a sharp point—or a sort of drill—at the other, to probe for grain." (*The Harvest of Sorrow*, 229.) And Conquest quotes from a memoir by a former activist, Lev Kopelev: "I took part in this myself, scouring the countryside, searching for hidden grain, testing the earth with an iron rod for loose spots that might lead to buried grain. With the others, I emptied out the old folks' storage chests, stopping my ears to the children's crying and the women's wails. For I was convinced that I was accomplishing the great and necessary transformation of the countryside; that in the days to come the people who lived there would be better off for it." (*The Harvest of Sorrow*, 233.)

subkulak parasites Peasants who were considered hostile to collectivization, but who were too poor to be considered kulaks, were labeled "subkulaks."

one big show Grossman is alluding to a visit made to the Ukraine in late summer of 1933 by the French radical leader Edouard Herriot. Conquest quotes the following account of the preparations made to receive Herriot at a collective farm near Kiev: "A special meeting of the regional party organization was held in Kiev for the purpose of transforming this collective farm into a 'Potemkin village'...experienced agronomists were made into brigade members of the farm....Furniture from the regional theatre in Brovary was brought, and the clubrooms beautifully appointed with it. Curtains and drapes were brought from Kiev, also tablecloths. One wing was turned into a dining-hall, the tables of which were covered with new cloths and decorated with flowers. The regional telephone exchange, and the switchboard operator, were transferred from Brovary to the farm. Some steers and hogs were slaughtered to provide plenty of meat. A supply of beer was also brought in. All the corpses and starving peasants were removed from the highways in the surrounding countryside and the peasants were forbidden to leave their houses. A mass meeting of collective farm workers was called, and they were told that a motion picture would be made of collective farm life, and for this purpose this particular farm had been chosen by a film-studio from Odessa. Only those who were chosen to play in the picture would turn out for work, the rest of the members must stay at home and not interfere." (*The Harvest of Sorrow*, 314–15.) Not all foreigners, however, were duped. As Malcolm Muggeridge reported in the early summer of 1933: "On a recent visit to the Northern Caucasus and the Ukraine, I saw something of the battle that is going on between the government and the peasants. The battlefield is as desolate as in any war and stretches wider; stretches over a large part of Russia. On the one side, millions of starving peasants, their bodies often swollen from lack of food; on the other, soldier members of the GPU carrying out the instructions of the dictatorship of the proletariat. They had gone over the country like a swarm of locusts and taken away everything edible; they had shot or exiled thousands of peasants, sometimes whole villages; they had reduced some of the most fertile land in the world to a melancholy desert." (Quoted in *The Harvest of Sorrow*, 260.)

on the stove A Russian stove was a large brick or clay structure taking up between one-fifth and one-quarter of the room it stood in. Sleeping places were often arranged in relation to it. Sometimes a sleeping bench was attached to one side of it; sometimes people slept on a wide shelf above it; often people slept directly on the warm brick surface of the stove itself.

The whole village had died "Of a Ukrainian farm population of between twenty and twenty-five million, about five million died—a quarter to a fifth. The casualty rate varied considerably by area and even village, from 10% to 100%....Time after time, officials tell of entering villages with few or no survivors, and seeing the dead in their houses. In villages of 3,000–4,000 people...only 45–80 were left." (Conquest, *The Harvest of Sorrow*, 249–51.) Tim Snyder's estimate for the number of deaths in the Ukraine is three and a half million. ("The Real, Ignored Holocaust" in *The New York Review of Books*, July 16, 2009.)

chalked on your back The translator and editor Natasha Perova has written of the queues she remembers from her own postwar childhood: "There were activists who supervised the queue and wrote numbers on your palm with an indelible pencil. There were also roll calls from time to time. Sometimes someone's number

would get erased accidentally. That was a tragedy. Then they started writing numbers on people's arms or elbows to keep them safe. In some queues they chalked numbers on backs to prevent cheating, but that was rare." (Personal correspondence.)

people stripped of their civic rights That is, those who had been designated as belonging to the category of citizens "deprived of rights which they have used to the detriment of the Socialist Revolution."

bread rings Similar to Italian bread sticks, but in the shape of small rings.

Lefortovo An important Moscow pre-trial prison. In the late 1930s it was notorious for the tortures carried out there. During these years, the corridors and cells were painted black.

numerus clausus An 1887 decree limiting the number of Jews allowed to study in Russian universities. The proportion of Jewish students was limited to 10 percent in cities where Jews had the right to live, 5 percent in other cities, and 3 percent in Moscow and St. Petersburg. These restrictions were removed after the 1917 revolution.

Pale of Settlement The area along Russia's western border in which Jews were allowed to live. Comprising around 20 percent of the territory of European Russia, the Pale existed from 1791 until 1917 and included much of present-day Lithuania, Belarus, Poland, Moldova, and Ukraine, as well as parts of western Russia. Jews were, with certain exceptions, forbidden to live elsewhere in the Russian Empire.

district and provincial Chekas; of RevKoms, UKoms, and GubProdKoms; of KomBeds, PolitProsvets, and SovNarKhozes That is, of district-level and provincial-level security organs; of Revolutionary Committees, Regional Committees, and Provincial Provisions and Foodstuffs Committees; of Committees of the Poor, Political Enlightenment Organizations, and Soviets for the National Economy.

Socialism in One Country This theory—that it was no longer necessary to encourage revolution in the capitalist countries, since Russia could and should achieve socialism alone—was first articulated in 1924 by Bukharin. It was only then taken up by Stalin.

Moscow Tailoring Combine Clothes produced by this factory were notoriously ugly. The poet Osip Mandelstam declared ironically during the 1930s, "I am a man of the epoch of the Moscow Tailoring Combine."

Golden Library and on the adventure stories of Louis Boussenard The Golden Library was a famous series of classics for young people, published in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; Louis Boussenard (1847–1911) wrote popular adventure novels somewhat in the manner of Jules Verne.

Talmud Torah schools A form of primary school, dating back to the first century of the Common Era, for Jewish boys of modest backgrounds. They were given an elementary education in Hebrew, the Torah, and the Talmud.

everything is real and rational An allusion to Hegel's famous dictum, much discussed in Russian radical circles during the nineteenth century, that "everything that is rational is real and everything that is real is rational."

voluntary working Saturdays There was a tradition in the Soviet Union of voluntary working Saturdays (*subbotniki*). Lenin himself participated in the first all-Russian *subbotnik* (May 1, 1920), helping to remove building rubble from the Kremlin. These voluntary working Saturdays soon ceased to be voluntary—if they ever were.

set Russia on a new path During the June 1917 Congress of Soviets in Petrograd, the Menshevik minister Irakli Tsereteli said that Russia could achieve democracy and victory in the war only if the different political parties cooperated. To his assertion that there was no single party that could take power and maintain order in Russia, Lenin famously declared from the back of the hall, "There is such a party. It is the Bolshevik Party!" To most of those present, Lenin's statement seemed absurd. The Bolsheviks had 105 delegates; the other parties, between them, had 822.

listened to the Appassionata Lenin said that he once wept after listening to Beethoven's *Appassionata* sonata. He famously went on to say that "a revolutionary cannot afford to give way to such sentiments, because they make him too weak, wanting to pat his enemies on the head instead of fighting them mercilessly." (Slavoj Zizek, *Revolution at the Gates* [London: Verso, 2002], 197.)

Lenin's unfinished portrait The lines Grossman quotes are from a once well-known poem by Nikolay Gavrilovich Poletaev (1889–1935). Poletaev is now all but forgotten.

author of one memoir about Lenin Grossman is referring to the author Maria Moiseyevna Essen (1872–1956).

law of the Gospel of Christ This quote is from a famous speech given by Dostoevsky in June 1880, at the unveiling of the Pushkin monument in Moscow.

the bridges thunder Grossman goes on to refer several times to this famous passage from the end of the first part of Gogol's *Dead Souls* (translated by Donald Rayfield [London: Garnett Press, 2008], 267–68):

> And what Russian does not enjoy riding fast? How can his soul, which feels the urge to whirl, to take the bit in his mouth, to say sometimes, "The devil take the hindmost," how can his soul not love riding fast?...Oh, the troika of three horses and a carriage: bird-like troika, who invented you?...Russia, are you not also like the bold troika which no-one can overtake? The road is a cloud of smoke under your wheels, the bridges thunder, everything lags behind and is stranded in the rear. The beholder stops, struck by a divine miracle: is this a bolt of lightning from heaven? What does this awe-inspiring movement mean? What sort of unknown force propels these horses which the world has never seen before? Oh, horses, horses, what horses! Does the howling gale have its source in your manes? Is there a keen ear burning on your every sinew? You have caught the sound of a familiar song on high, you have girded your bronze chests together as one and, your hooves barely touching the ground, you have been transformed into just endless lines flying through the air, and the whole troika flies, inspired by God!...Russia, where are you hurtling to? Give an answer! There is no answer. The bell peals with a wonderful ringing; the air, ripped to pieces, roars and becomes wind; everything that exists on earth flies past, and other nations and empires look askance and stand back to make way for the troika.

our entire history Like the passage Grossman quotes a few lines above, this is from Chaadaev's letter to A. de Sircour of June 15, 1846.

move from one landlord to another There are two festivals of St. Yury (St. George) in the Orthodox calendar, in the spring and in the autumn. Autumn Yury's Day, celebrated on November 26, when the harvest has been completed, had a special importance. A Code of Law introduced in 1497 by Ivan III established the two-week period around Autumn Yury's Day (one week before the feast and one week after it), as the only time of the year when a peasant was free to move from one landowner to another. A century later, Boris Godunov annulled this freedom, thus finalizing the evolution of serfdom.

And still more sternly carry on his cause From "Lenin," by Sergey Yesenin (1895–1925). "Lenin" is part of a longer poem, *Gulyay-polye*, written in 1924 (the year of Lenin's death) .

"party of a new type" Lenin first used this phrase in 1903. He meant by it that the party would be a disciplined, quasi-military organization—not merely an association of more or less like-minded people.

"Little Apple" and "The Fried Chicken," "The Fried Chicken" describes how a fried chicken, walking down Nevsky Prospekt, is stopped by the police. Unable to produce his passport or pay a bribe, he is torn to pieces. The last line of the song is "But chickens want to live too!" "Little Apple" is another street song from the same period.

Proletkult A portmanteau of *proletarskaya kultura* (proletarian culture). This movement, active in the early Soviet Union, aimed to provide the foundation for a truly proletarian art, free from bourgeois influence. Its main theoretician, Aleksandr Bogdanov (1873–1928), saw the proletkult as the third part of a revolutionary trinity. While the unions attended to the proletariat's economic interests and the Communist Party to their political interests, the proletkult would care for their cultural and spiritual life.

boyars The old Russian nobility.

oprichniki The unofficial private army of Ivan the Terrible, used to destroy the power of the boyars, or old nobility. The *oprichniki* rode black horses, each with a dog's head and a broom attached to his saddle—a reminder that their duty was "to bite the enemies of the tsar and sweep away treason."

gravedigger of freedom Grossman is probably alluding to the following passage of *The Communist Manifesto*: "What the bourgeoisie therefore produces, above all, are its own gravediggers. Its fall and the victory of the proletariat are equally inevitable."

Chronology

1547 – 84 Reign of Ivan the Terrible
1584–1605 Boris Godunov rules Russia; after his death, the country sinks into the period of confusion known as the Time of Troubles
1703 Peter the Great founds St. Petersburg
1762 – 96 Reign of Catherine the Great
1825 Decembrist Revolt: an unsuccessful coup by liberal members of the aristocracy; Tsar Nicholas I comes to the throne
1842 Publication of Gogol's *Dead Souls*
1861 Emancipation of the serfs
1881 Alexander II assassinated by members of The People's Will
1891 Beginning of construction of Trans-Siberian Railway
1905 Birth of Vasily Semyonovich Grossman
1917 Tsar Nicholas II abdicates after February Revolution; workers' soviets (councils) are set up in Petrograd and Moscow; Lenin and his Bolshevik Party seize power in the October Revolution
1918 – 21 Russian Civil War, accompanied by the draconian economic policies known as War Communism; although there were many different factions, the two main forces were the Red Army (Communists) and the White Army (anti-Communists); foreign powers also intervened, to little effect, and millions perished before the Red Army, led by Leon Trotsky, defeated the Whites in 1920 ; smaller battles continued for several years
1921 After an uprising in March by sailors at the naval base of Kronstadt, Lenin made a tactical retreat, introducing the at least relatively liberal New Economic Policy (NEP), which lasted until 1928 ; many of the more idealistic Communists saw this as a step backward, as a shameful compromise with the forces of capitalism; the NEP was not, however, accompanied by any political liberalization
1924 Death of Lenin; Petrograd is renamed Leningrad; Stalin begins to take power
1928 – 1937 The first and second of Stalin's five-year plans bring about a remarkable increase in the production of coal, iron, and steel
1929 Collectivization of agriculture begins
1932–33 Between three to five million peasants die in the Terror Famine in Ukraine
1934 Foundation of Union of Soviet Writers; Grossman publishes the story "In the Town of Berdichev" and the novel *Glyukauf*, about the life of the Donbass miners
1934–39 The Great Purges; at least a million people are shot and several million sent to the Gulag
1939 Stalin–Hitler pact; beginning of Second World War
1941 Hitler invades the Soviet Union; Leningrad is blockaded and Moscow under threat; Grossman begins to work as a war correspondent for *Krasnaya Zvezda* (the Red Army newspaper)
1945 End of Second World War
1946 Andrey Zhdanov, then seen as a possible heir to Stalin, tightens control over the arts
1948 Trofim Lysenko becomes more dominant than ever in Soviet biology, and especially agriculture; genetics is officially declared a bourgeois pseudoscience; around three thousand biologists are fired from their jobs and many are arrested
1953 January 13: Publication of article in *Pravda* about the Jewish Killer Doctors; preparations continue for a purge of Soviet Jews; Grossman's recently published novel, *For a Just Cause*, is fiercely attacked; March 5: Death of Stalin; April 4: Official acknowledgment that the case against the Killer Doctors was entirely false
1956 Khrushchev denounces Stalin at the Twentieth Party Congress; millions of prisoners are released from the camps; start of a more liberal period known as "The Thaw"
1958 Publication abroad of *Doctor Zhivago* ; under pressure from Soviet authorities, Pasternak declines to accept the Nobel Prize
1961 The KGB confiscates the manuscript of Grossman's *Life and Fate*
1962 Publication of Solzhenitsyn's One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich
1964 Fall of Khrushchev. Death of Vasily Grossman.
1974 Solzhenitsyn deported after publication in the West of *The Gulag Archipelago*
1985 Mikhail Gorbachev comes to power; beginning of the period of liberal reforms known as perestroika; the next few years see the first publication in Russia of Grossman's Life and Fate and Everything Flows, and of important works by Krzhizhanovsky, Platonov, Shalamov, Solzhenitsyn and many others.
1991 Collapse of the Soviet Union

A Note On Collectivization and the Terror Famine

These events are so tragic, and so vast, that they can seem entirely beyond understanding. Even Stalin's Great Purges of 1934–39 are easier to understand; they were a successful attempt on Stalin's part to destroy, or terrify into submission, any members of the Soviet elite who might conceivably oppose him. It is harder to understand why a ruler should choose to destroy a huge part of the peasantry that had, until then, produced much of the nation's wealth.

What blinds us, perhaps, is the Soviet emblem—the hammer (representing the workers) and the sickle (representing the peasants). The Soviet government referred to itself as a "workers' and peasants' government"—and we have been too ready to believe them. In actual fact, few of the Bolsheviks ever seem to have had much sympathy with the peasants. Most of them probably felt much the same as Lenin's friend, Maksim Gorky, who once declared, "You'll pardon my saying so, but the peasant is not yet human...He's our enemy, our enemy." In 1917 Lenin had done his best to buy the support of the peasants with his slogan "Peace, Bread, and Land"; he had encouraged peasants to seize their landlords' estates and burn down their houses. Nevertheless, even then, the peasants had voted not for the Bolsheviks but for the Socialist Revolutionaries, whom they rightly saw as more likely to represent their interests. And after 1917, after encouraging the peasants to rise up against their landlords and therefore destabilize the Provisional Government, the Bolsheviks found themselves having to fight a fifteen-year war—with an uneasy truce in the mid-1920s—in order to reassert the power of the central government. The Bolsheviks saw the peasants not only as subhuman but also as wily proto-capitalists whose whole way of life threatened their cherished project of a strong, centrally planned State.

The first measure Stalin took was to collectivize the peasants, to destroy the independence of the individual peasants. Collectivization was imposed throughout the entire Soviet Union. Stalin's second measure was directed primarily against the Ukraine; Ukrainian peasants were, for the main part, wealthier, and their opposition to collectivization was particularly strong. The story of the Ukrainian famine is still not widely known, even though Robert Conquest told it more than twenty years ago in *The Harvest of Sorrow*. I am grateful to Donald Rayfield for allowing me to include the following paragraphs to provide some general background to Grossman's own painfully vivid account.[1]

A famine which struck all the grain-producing areas of European Russia, and especially Ukraine, reached a climax in the summer of 1933. It began years earlier, however, when Stalin in the winter of 1929 and 1930 dispossessed, exiled and killed millions of the more prosperous peasants and harassed the remaining peasantry into surrendering land, animals and tools into collective farms; it was made inevitable in the second and final wave of collectivization in the winter of 1930–1931, when a disorganized and disillusioned peasantry was effectively enslaved. This achievement Stalin proclaimed to a congress of peasants in February 1933 to be one "such as the world has never known before and which no other state in the world has tried to achieve." At the same time Stalin and his henchmen resolved to industrialize the Soviet Union by selling grain in order to buy machinery from America, Britain and Germany.

By June 1932, as a result of grain confiscation—khlebzagotovka, compulsory targets for grain to be delivered to the state—the Ukrainian countryside was already starving. The Secretary of the Ukrainian party, Stanislav Kosior, received letters from young communists, horrified to see, as they put it, "collective farmers go to the fields and vanish and a few days later the corpse is found and...the next day they find the corpse of the man who buried the first one."

The peasants' attempts to evade grain confiscation or to glean grain from the field were severely punished. The Soviet secret police, OGPU, under the personal supervision of its ailing head, Vyacheslav Menzhinsky and its ambitious deputy, Genrikh Yagoda, represented in Ukraine by Karl Karlson, monitored the situation and sent squads of men to enforce the containment of the starving peasantry, to punish (or occasionally to condone) cannibalism, and to keep the foreign press away from the countryside. They kept a tally, wherever they could, of deaths, as well as calculating how little food was left in what used to be Europe's breadbasket. Their statistics are one of the foundations for calculating the size of the catastrophe that ensued.

Our sources of information are varied and none are comprehensive or, in themselves, conclusive. Contemporary sources include letters to relatives abroad (Soviet post offices still accepted such letters until 1935), letters to newspapers (which were then passed on to the secret police), and statistics from registry offices, which in most famine-struck areas soon gave up registering deaths. They also include tallies kept for certain months in some areas by OGPU itself, and of course correspondence between party leaders, which was classified until the 1990s. A very few testimonies came from foreign journalists and diplomats, ingenious enough to evade the bans on travel and honest enough to publish stories that were often as unpalatable to their readers in the West as to the Soviet authorities. Later sources for judging the extent of the catastrophe come first from the census figures of 1937, when a deficit of several million in the predicted population of the USSR had to be concealed. In post-Soviet times demographers have been free to look at the age structure of the population and of its mortality in Ukraine before and after the famine, to

extrapolate for the Ukrainian countryside as a whole from data for a few areas or a few months the numbers of deaths over the famine period.

For Ukrainian famine areas, the death toll from famine in 1932–1933 appears to depend on the methodology and trustworthiness of the demographer involved. One objective fact is that in 1939 there were 28 million Ukrainians, compared with 31 million in 1926, at a time when (barring famine) the birth rate was often twice the death rate. Deaths are calculated on this basis at anywhere between 2.4 and 4 million. More sophisticated studies give a figure nearer to 5 million. OGPU's tally from December 1932 to mid-April 1933 give a figure of 2.4 million deaths from famine and cannibalism; by extrapolating these figures for the whole of the famine period, we get a plausible figure of over 7 million deaths. Even the Soviet census figures for 1939 indicate a catastrophe: whereas Ukraine in 1928 had 420,000 deaths and 985,000 births, in 1933 it recorded 1,582,000 deaths and only 34,000 births. Secret figures for the Ukrainian countryside show deaths rising from an acceptable 15,100 in January 1932 to a monstrous 196,200 in June 1932, not stabilizing to 12,000 (in a now much smaller population) until the end of 1934.

Thus, nobody can deny that, in the absence of war or severe droughts, a man-made catastrophe taking the lives of millions of Ukrainian peasants occurred. Because of the absence of full records, because death from starvation is not as easily defined as death from a bullet or in a gas chamber, since it may be disguised as dysentery, typhoid, tuberculosis or suicide, and because it is impossible to say how many more people should have existed in 1934 who didn't, we shall never be able to determine the exact figure, but clearly it is of the same order as the catastrophe that struck Europe's Jews in 1942–1945 or Cambodia's population in 1975–1979.

Mass murder, of course, requires intent, or at the very least the obvious prospect of death as a secondary result of the murderer's actions. The figures for grain production and for grain confiscation in Ukraine, there is no doubt, were fully available to Stalin and Kaganovich, Molotov, Mikoyan, Menzhinsky, and Yagoda, the henchmen most *responsible for overseeing the Ukrainian famine, and could by simple subtraction only have led them to conclude that millions would die in these areas. Stalin himself deliberately toured the lower Volga area in August 1933, just after the climax of the famine, and saw for himself, without the slightest regret, what he had done. The correspondence of the Politburo members reveals a full awareness and determination to see the whole process through to the bitter end.*

Some of today's neo-Stalinists will admit this, but justify it on the grounds that (a) the grain was needed as the sole means for purchasing modern technology and (b) industrialization was essential to build a Soviet Union strong and well-armed enough to save itself from its enemies. The most cynical neo-Stalinists might add that there was a problem of surplus peasantry in Russia, a problem solved a century earlier by similar famines in countries such as Ireland, or elsewhere, as in Scandinavia, by mass emigration, and that one quick famine was preferable to many more decades of malnutrition. All these arguments are, of course, indefensible: the near defeat of the USSR by Nazi Germany shows that forced industrialization did not save the Soviet Union, so much as the desperation of its people and the help of the Allies. And the state of agriculture in post-Soviet societies is no argument for the murder of so many peasants. Were any of the perpetrators of the famine alive and available for trial, they would *therefore have no defence in law against a charge of mass murder.*

[1]Rayfield's article, "The Ukrainian Famine of 1933: Man-made Catastrophe, Mass Murder, or Genocide?", is included in full in Lubomyr Y. Luciuk, Holodomor: Reflections on the Great Famine of 1932–1933 in Soviet Ukraine (Kingston, Canada: Kashtan Press, 2008) 87–93.

People and Political Organizations

Abakumov, Viktor Semyonovich (1908–1954): Head of the MGB (formerly known as the NKVD, later as the KGB) from 1946 to 1951. He directed the 1949 purge known as the Leningrad Affair. He was arrested before Stalin's death "for lack of zeal in combating the Doctors' Plot." After Stalin's death, he was accused of complicity with Beria, although in fact he and Beria were rivals, and executed.

Avvakum (c. 1621–1682): Russian priest who led the opposition to Patriarch Nikon's reform of Russian Orthodox rituals. He was imprisoned, exiled, and finally burned at the stake. His autobiography, written in a vivid, conversational Russian, is considered a masterpiece.

Bakunin, Mikhail Aleksandrovich (1814–1876): Along with Prince Kropotkin, the most important Russian anarchist; an opponent of Marx.

Bandera, Stepan Andriyovych (1909–1959): One of the leading figures in the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN), a Ukrainian political movement created in 1929 with the aim of establishing an independent Ukrainian state. The military wing of the OUN, the Ukrainian Insurgent Army, created in 1942, was a major Ukrainian armed resistance movement.

Belinsky, Vissarion Grigoryevich (1811–1848): The most important nineteenth-century Russian literary critic; a radical and a Westernizer.

Benckendorff, Count Aleksandr Khristoforovich (1783–1844): A Russian statesman, now best remembered for having established the Third Section—a secret police force—under Nicholas I and for having been, in effect, Pushkin's personal censor.

Beria, Lavrenty Pavlovich (1899–1953): Head of the NKVD from November 1938 until December 1945, after which he was deputy prime minister until Stalin's death. During the first months after Stalin's death, Beria, Malenkov, and Khrushchev formed a ruling troika. In June 1953, however, Beria was arrested, and in December he was executed.

Bernstein, Eduard (1850–1932): An important German Social Democrat, the founder of the reformist, nonrevolutionary current of socialism known as evolutionary socialism.

Blok, Alexandr (1880–1921): The finest of the Russian symbolist poets, referred to by Anna Akhmatova as "the tragic tenor of the epoch."

Bolshevik: In 1903, the Russian Social Democrat Party, a Marxist party founded in 1898, split into two factions: the Bolsheviks, led by Lenin, and the Mensheviks, led by Martov. Bolshevik means "majority," and Menshevik means "minority," but these names are deceptive—the Bolsheviks were, in fact, the smaller faction. They astutely managed to acquire their more impressive name as a result of winning one particular vote, relating to the composition of the editorial board of *Iskra*, the party's main organ.

Bruno, Giordano (1548–1600): An Italian occult philosopher and cosmologist. Burned at the stake by the Inquisition, Bruno is sometimes seen as one of the first martyrs for science. He was remarkable for both his intelligence and his courage. In Russian culture, however, his name has become a byword for fanaticism; he has often been contrasted with Galileo, who was, of course, more ready to compromise.

Budyonny, Semyon Mikhailovich (1883–1973): A civil war hero and ally of Stalin.

Bukharin, Nikolay Ivanovich (1888–1938): One of the most important of the Old Bolsheviks. In 1926 Bukharin became president of the Communist International, or Comintern. From 1926 to mid-1928 Bukharin was an ally of Stalin; it was Bukharin who first outlined the Stalinist theory of Socialism in One Country. According to this theory, it was no longer necessary to encourage revolution in the capitalist countries, since Russia could and should achieve socialism alone. From mid-1928, Bukharin opposed Stalin's program of crash industrialization and forced collectivization, supporting a continuation of the more liberal policies (the New Economic Policy) that had been in force since 1924. Bukharin was expelled from the Politburo in late 1929; he and his supporters were by then known as the Right Opposition, or Right Deviationists. In 1934 Bukharin was "rehabilitated" by Stalin and appointed editor of *Izvestiya*. Bukharin was arrested in 1937 and charged with conspiring to overthrow the Soviet state. He was tried in March

1938, in the last of the Moscow Trials, and executed soon afterward.

Bulgakov, Sergey Nikolaevich (1871–1944): A Russian Orthodox theologian, philosopher, and economist. After a period as a Marxist, he returned to Orthodoxy and, in 1903, published *From Marxism to Idealism*. He published another important book, *Unfading Light*, in 1917 and was ordained as a priest in 1918. After rising to prominence in church circles, he was expelled from Russia in late 1922.

Catherine the Great (1729–1796): Empress of Russia from 1762 until 1796. Marrying into the Russian Imperial family, she came to power with the deposition of her husband, Peter III, and presided over a period of growth in Russian influence and culture. During her reign the Russian Empire expanded southward and westward at the expense of both the Ottoman Empire and the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth. She wanted to be seen as an enlightened despot and corresponded regularly with Voltaire. At the same time, however, she did more to tie the Russian serf to his land and to his lord than any sovereign since Boris Godunov.

Chaadaev, Pyotr Yakovlevich (1794–1856): An important Russian writer and thinker. His *Philosophical Letters* are highly critical of Russia's intellectual isolation and social backwardness. Only the first of these letters was published during his lifetime; the others circulated in manuscript. This first letter began the long battle, so important in nineteenth-century Russian thought, between the Westerners and the Slavophiles.

Chapaev, Vasily Ivanovich (1887–1919): A Russian Civil War hero. *Chapaev* is the title of a famous 1934 film based on his exploits. He is also the subject of countless Soviet jokes.

Chernov, Viktor Mikhailovich (1873–1952): A founder of the Socialist Revolutionary Party. Minister for agriculture in the provisional government in 1917, and chairman of the Constituent Assembly before it was disbanded by the Bolsheviks in January 1918.

Chernyshevsky, Nikolay Gavrilovich (1828–1889): Revolutionary writer and philosopher, the founder of the populist movement, and an important influence on Lenin. In 1862, after being arrested and imprisoned, he wrote the novel *What Is to Be Done?* This was an important inspiration for Lenin and other Russian revolutionaries. The hero is ascetic and ruthlessly disciplined; in order to develop strength for his work as a revolutionary, he sleeps on a bed of nails and eats only meat.

Chichibabin, Aleksey Yevgenyevich (1871–1945): An important chemist who won the Lenin Prize in 1926. After being allowed to go to Paris in 1930, he defected and chose to remain there.

Comintern: The Communist International (also known as the Third International) was an international organization founded in Moscow in March 1919. Its aim was to fight "by all available means, including armed force, for the overthrow of the international bourgeoisie and for the creation of an international Soviet republic as a transition stage to the complete abolition of the State." The Comintern held seven World Congresses altogether—the last was in 1935—but it had lost its importance by the late 1920s. It was officially dissolved in 1943.

Constituent Assembly: A democratically elected constitutional body convened after the October Revolution. It met for thirteen hours on January 5 and 6, 1918, before being dissolved by the Bolsheviks, who had won only about a quarter of the overall vote. The Bolsheviks had 168 deputies; the Socialist Revolutionaries around twice as many.

Cunow, Heinrich (1862–1936): A German Social Democrat theoretician, critical of Marx.

Degaev, Sergey (1857–1920): An active member of the People's Will, and at the same time an agent for the tsarist secret police, or Okhranka . He betrayed several important revolutionaries. He admitted his guilt after being questioned by his comrades and was ordered, under threat of death, to assassinate Colonel Sudeikin, the head of the Okhranka. After assassinating Sudeikin in 1883, he emigrated to the United States, where he lived the rest of his life under a false name.

Denikin, Anton Ivanovich (1872–1947): Commander of the White Armies in the south of Russia during the civil war.

Eikhe, Robert Indrikovich (1890–1940): Old Bolshevik, responsible for grain requisitioning in the mid-1920s, and western Siberia Party chief in the 1930s. He was executed in 1940.

Engels, Friedrich (1820–1895): A German social scientist and philosopher, co-author with Karl Marx of *The Communist Manifesto* (1848).

Etinger, Yakov Gilyarievich (1887–1951): A Jewish doctor accused of killing Zhdanov and Shcherbakov under the pretense of treating them.

Fet, Afanasy Afanasyevich (1820–1892): The most important Russian poet of the last quarter of the nineteenth century. The radicals hated him for his conservative political views, but he had a profound influence on the Russian symbolist movement.

Frankfurt, Semyon Mironovich (1888–1937): In charge of the construction of two of the most important Soviet metalworks plants, in Kuznetsk and Orsk-Khalilov. He was arrested and executed in 1937.

Gershuni, Grigory Andreyevich (1870–1908): One of the founders of the Socialist Revolutionary Party.

Gogol, Nikolay Vasilyevich (1809–1852): A Ukrainian-born Russian writer. The novel *Dead Souls* and the short story "The Overcoat" (both 1842) are among his masterpieces. Gogol's contemporaries mostly saw him as a social satirist, not realizing that Gogol saw himself primarily as a prophet and preacher. Gogol intended *Dead Souls* to be the first part of a modern *Divine Comedy* ; the next part was to depict the hero's purification. Gogol, however, ended up burning the second part of the novel in 1852, having come to believe that his imaginative work was sinful. He died soon afterward.

Golovaty, Ferapont Petrovich: An old beekeeper from the Volga region who, in December 1942, told local officials that he wanted to give all his personal savings—100,000 rubles—toward the construction of a warplane for the Stalingrad front. Golovaty's "personal initiative" received huge publicity.

Gorky, Maksim (1868–1936): A famous writer, seen as a founder of socialist realism. Though a friend of Lenin, he criticized him during and after the October Revolution for his suppression of freedom. During the 1920s and early 1930s he lived mainly in Capri. He visited the Soviet Union several times after 1929 and returned for good in 1932, supporting Stalin's cultural policies—though probably with misgivings. He undertook several publishing initiatives, one of which was a series with the general title *The History of Factories and Mills*. The circumstances of his death are obscure; the NKVD chief, Genrikh Yagoda, later confessed to having ordered him to be poisoned by his doctors, but this may have been a false confession. It is, nevertheless, possible that he was killed on Stalin's orders.

Gugel, Yakov Semyonovich (1895–1937): In charge of the construction of Magnitogorsk, a vast metalworks in the Urals. He was arrested and executed in 1937.

Gvakhariya, Georgy Vissarionovich (1901–1937): The extremely successful director of the S. M. Kirov Iron and Steel Plant in the Donbass region, a huge factory employing some twenty thousand workers and hundreds of technical and economic personnel. He was arrested and executed in 1937.

Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich (1770–1831): A German philosopher, and one of the founders of German idealism.

Herzen, Aleksandr Ivanovich (1812–1870): An important liberal and pro-Western writer and thinker. From 1857 to 1867, first from London and then from Geneva, he published the radical periodical *The Bell*. Though banned in Russia, it had a wide illegal circulation there and was of real influence.

Hilferding, Rudolf (1877–1941): An Austrian Social Democrat theoretician, critical of Marx.

Ipatyev, Vladimir Nikolaevich (1867–1952): A prominent Russian chemist. He defected to the United States in 1927, where he spent the last twenty years of his life.

Ivan the Terrible (1530–1584): Grand prince of Moscow from 1533 and Tsar of All Russia from 1547. A devout, intelligent, but mentally unstable ruler, whose long reign saw the conquest of the Khanates of Kazan and Astrakhan and transformed Russia into a huge multiethnic and multiconfessional state. The first half of his reign saw peaceful reforms and modernization. In 1565, however, he created the Oprichnina, a section of mainly northeastern Russia under his own direct rule and policed by his personal servicemen, the *oprichniki*. The Oprichnina was intended as a tool against the powerful hereditary nobility, or boyars, but its creation was an indication of Ivan's increasing paranoia. The second half of his reign was marked by famine, plague, long unsuccessful wars, and ever increasing violence on the part of the *oprichniki*.

Izotov, Nikita Alekseyevich (1902–1951): A Donbass miner supposed to have produced, in a single day, thirty times more coal than the norm.

Kaledin, Aleksey Maksimovich (1861–1918): A Russian cavalry general who led the Don Cossack White armies

in the opening stages of the civil war.

Kalmykov, Betal Edykovich (1893–1940): An important Soviet politician from the north Caucasus, who was first secretary of the Kabardino-Balkariya autonomous republic.

Kalyaev, Ivan Platonovich (1877–1905): A poet, terrorist, and member of the Socialist Revolutionary Party. After assassinating Grand Duke Sergey Aleksandrovich in 1905, he was hanged.

Kamenev, Lev Borisovich (né Lev Borisovich Rosenfeld, 1883–1936): An important Old Bolshevik. During the period of Lenin's illness (1923–1924), Kamenev, Zinoviev, and Stalin allied against Trotsky and succeeded in marginalizing him. In December 1925, however, Kamenev publicly demanded that Stalin be removed from his position as general secretary. With only Zinoviev and the Leningrad delegation behind him, Kamenev was defeated. Kamenev then formed a United Opposition with Zinoviev and Trotsky, but this too was crushed; Kamenev, Zinoviev, and Trotsky were all expelled from the Party in December 1927. After publicly "acknowledging their mistakes," both Zinoviev and Kamenev were readmitted to the Party. They were courted by Bukharin in the summer of 1928, at the beginning of his own ill-fated struggle with Stalin—but this was reported to Stalin and used against Bukharin. After being arrested in December 1934, Zinoviev and Kamenev were both sentenced to prison. In August 1936, Zinoviev, Kamenev, and fourteen others, mostly Old Bolsheviks, were put on trial a second time. The charges including involvement in the assassination of the Old Bolshevik Sergey Kirov in 1934, as well as attempting to kill Stalin. This trial of the Trotskyite-Zinovievite Terrorist Center was the first of the Moscow Trials. Like the other defendants, Kamenev was found guilty and shot.

Kautsky, Karl (1854–1938): The leading Marxist thinker after the death of his close friend Friedrich Engels and an important figure in the German Social Democratic Party. Lenin considered Kautsky a "renegade," and Kautsky, for his part, accused Lenin of having laid the foundations for a new dictatorship.

Khatayevich, Mendel Markovich (1893–1937): A Soviet politician, one of the men responsible for the implementation of the policies that brought about the Terror Famine in the Ukraine. He was executed in 1937.

Khodzhaev, Faizulla (1896–1938): The prime minister of Uzbekistan from 1925 until 1937. He was executed in 1938.

Kibalchich, Nikolay Ivanovich (1853–1881): The main explosive expert for the People's Will terrorist organization. In April 1881 he was hanged for his part in the assassination of Tsar Alexander II. He was the paternal uncle of the writer Viktor Serge.

Kirov, Sergey Mironovich (1886–1934): An important Old Bolshevik, who enjoyed considerable popularity. He was assassinated in 1934. It is possible that Stalin saw him as a rival and ordered this assassination. Stalin succeeded, in any case, in using the assassination for his own purposes, as a justification for the Great Purge during which he eliminated the overwhelming majority of the Old Bolsheviks.

Kobulov, Bogdan Zakharovich (1904–1953): A henchman of Beria. He was executed after Stalin's death.

Kogan, Mikhail Borisovich (d. 1951): One of the "Killer Doctors," alleged to have worked for many years as an agent of British Intelligence.

Kolchak, Aleksandr Vasiliyevich (1874–1920): Commander of the White Armies in Siberia and the Urals during the civil war. He was executed in 1920.

Komsomol: The Communist Union of Youth, founded in 1918. It played an important role in instilling Communist values in the young, and as an organ for introducing them to the political domain. At its height, in the 1970s, Komsomol membership numbered in the tens of millions.

Kornilov, Lavr Georgievich (1870–1918): White Army general in southern Russia during the civil war.

Kropotkin, Prince Pyotr Alekseyevich (1842–1921): The most important Russian anarchist-philosopher and an advocate of a communalist society free from central government.

Lavrov, Pyotr Lavrovich (1823–1900): A prominent Russian revolutionary philosopher. He believed that while it would be easy to bring about a coup d'état in Russia, the creation of a socialist society needed to involve the masses and, above all, the peasantry.

Left Deviation (Left Opposition): A Communist Party faction opposed to Stalin and led, from 1923 to 1927, by

Trotsky.

Lenin, Vladimir Ilyich (né Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov, 1870–1924): The main leader of the October Revolution and, from 1922, the first leader of the Soviet Union. His father was a successful Russian official in public education. When Lenin was seventeen years old, his eldest brother, Aleksandr, was hanged for participating in a plot against the life of Tsar Alexander III. After qualifying as a lawyer and practicing for several years, Lenin was arrested in 1895 and sentenced to exile in Siberia, where he associated with Plekhanov and other Socialist exiles. In 1900, after his exile came to an end, he left Russia and spent most of the next seventeen years in Western Europe.

Lenin was an active member of the Russian Social Democrat Party and, in 1903, he led the Bolshevik faction after it split from the Menshevik faction. Until 1917, the Bolshevik Party appeared to be of only marginal importance. Two months after the February Revolution, however, Lenin arrived in Petrograd by train and immediately published his *April Theses*, calling for uncompromising opposition to the Provisional Government. Initially, this isolated the Bolsheviks; later, however, it enabled them to win the support of most of those who were disillusioned with the Provisional Government. After having to flee to Finland in July, Lenin returned to Petrograd in October, inspiring the October Revolution with his slogans of "Peace, Bread, and Land" and "All Power to the Soviets!" In January 1918, Lenin shut down the Russian Constitutional Assembly during its first session and formed a coalition government with the left wing of the Socialist Revolutionaries. This coalition soon collapsed, and Lenin outlawed the Socialist Revolutionaries, along with all other political parties.

An attempt on Lenin's life in January 1918 was used to justify a Red Terror against enemies of the revolution, conducted by the Cheka (the Special Committee, or secret police) . When Kamenev and Bukharin tried to curb the excesses of the Cheka in late 1918, it was Lenin—consistently an advocate of mass terror—who defended it.

In May 1922, a stroke left Lenin partially paralyzed. In December 1922 and in March 1923, he suffered two more strokes and was left bedridden and unable to speak. After his first stroke, Lenin dictated to his wife a controversial document known as "Lenin's Testament"—his thoughts about the Party's future leadership. Lenin's wife, Nadezhda Krupskaya, sent this to the Central Committee after Lenin's death, asking for it to be read at the Thirteenth Party Congress in May 1924. Since it included criticisms of all the leading Old Bolsheviks, the Central Committee chose to keep the testament secret.

Lenin died on January 21, 1924, at the age of fifty-three. More than 900,000 people passed through the Hall of Columns during the four days and nights that Lenin lay in state. The city of Petrograd was renamed Leningrad in his honor. Within a week of his death, Lenin's body was embalmed and placed on exhibition in the Lenin Mausoleum in Moscow.

Lunacharsky, Anatoly Vasilyevich (1875–1933): As the first Soviet people's commissar of enlightenment, he was responsible for Soviet cultural policy and oversaw a huge improvement in Russia's literacy rate. One of the few prominent Old Bolsheviks to die a natural death.

Lysenko, Trofim Denisovich (1898–1976): The dominating figure in Soviet biology, and especially agriculture, from the late 1930s until the mid-1950s. Lysenko was an opponent of Mendelian genetics. His influence peaked in 1948, when genetics was officially declared a bourgeois pseudoscience. All geneticists were fired and many were arrested. Most of Lysenko's scientific claims—for example, his "discovery" in the late 1940s of strains of wheat that can be grown north of the Arctic Circle—were entirely fraudulent.

MacDonald, James Ramsay (1866–1937): Founding figure of the British Labour Party and the first Labour prime minister. His decision in 1931 to form a so-called National Government, in coalition with the Conservatives, has long been seen by the Left as an act of betrayal.

Martov, Julius (né Yuly Osipovich Tsederbaum, 1873–1923): The leader of the Menshevik faction of the Russian Social Democratic Party, a faction that split with the Bolsheviks at the Party Congress held in London in 1903. Once a close friend of Lenin, he was exiled in 1920.

Marx, Karl Heinrich (1818–1883): A revolutionary philosopher and political economist, the father of Communism. Marx argued that capitalism, like previous socioeconomic systems, will produce internal tensions which will lead to its destruction. Just as capitalism replaced feudalism, so capitalism will be replaced by Communism, though only after a transitional period he referred to as "the dictatorship of the proletariat."

Mayakovsky, Vladimir Vladimirovich (1893–1930): A poet and playwright, among the most important of the Russian futurists. A great deal of his work was dedicated to the Bolshevik cause. In April 1930, unhappy in love and disillusioned with Soviet Russia, Mayakovsky shot himself. The words "Lenin lives, lived, and will live"—engraved on monuments all over the Soviet Union—are from his elegy, "Vladimir Ilyich

Lenin."

Mendel, Gregor Johann (1822–1884): An Austrian scientist and Augustinian priest, often called the father of genetics for his study of the inheritance of traits in pea plants. The significance of his work was not recognized until the early twentieth century.

Mendeleyev, Dmitry Ivanovich (1834–1907): A great Russian chemist, the creator of the first version of the periodic table of elements.

Menshevik: In 1903, the Russian Social Democrat Party, a Marxist party founded in 1898, split into two factions: the Bolsheviks, led by Lenin, and the Mensheviks, led by Martov. Along with all other political parties, except for the Bolsheviks, the Mensheviks were banned after the revolution. In 1921, Lenin wrote, "The only place for Mensheviks and Socialist Revolutionaries, whether they hide their allegiances or are open about them, is prison."

Merkulov, Vsevolod Nikolaevich (1895–1953): A henchman of Beria. He was arrested and executed at the same time as Beria.

Mikhailov, Timofey Mikhailovich (1859–1881): A member of the People's Will, executed for his part in the assassination of Tsar Alexander II.

Mikhailovsky, Nikolay Konstantinovich (1842–1904): A journalist, critic, and leading theorist of the populist movement.

Mikhoels, Solomon Mikhailovich (né Vovsi, 1890–1948): The director of the Moscow Yiddish theater and chairman of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee founded in 1942. In this latter capacity he traveled around the world, encouraging Jewish communities to support the Soviet Union against Nazi Germany. After 1945, however, Stalin opposed contact between Soviet Jews and Jewish communities in other countries, and most members of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee were arrested. Mikhoels was assassinated on orders from Stalin; his death was masked as a car crash.

Nechaev, Sergey Gennadievich (1847–1882): A member of the revolutionary movement known as the Nihilists; he believed in the single-minded pursuit of revolution by any means, including political violence.

Nekrasov, Nikolay Alekseyevich (1821–1878): A Russian radical poet, writer, critic, and publisher.

OGPU: Over the decades the Soviet state security service underwent many changes of name. The most important of these names, in chronological order, are the Cheka (an acronym for Special Committee), the OGPU, the NKVD, and the KGB. In post-Soviet Russia the state security service is known as the FSB.

Pasternak, Boris Leonidovich (1890–1960): A famous poet. In 1958 he was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature for his novel *Doctor Zhivago*, which was banned in the Soviet Union but had been published in Italy. Under pressure from the authorities, he declined to accept the prize.

People's Will (Narodnaya Volya): A Russian revolutionary organization, responsible for a number of terrorist attacks, including the 1881 assassination of Tsar Alexander II. Unlike the Marxists, the People's Will believed that Russia could achieve socialism through a peasant revolution, bypassing the stage of capitalism. Between 1879 and 1883, most of the organization's members were imprisoned or exiled. At the turn of the century, however, as these veteran revolutionaries were released, they helped to form the Socialist Revolutionary Party. This political party, eventually supported by most of the peasantry, revived many of the goals and methods of the People's Will.

Perovskaya, Sofya Lvovna (1853–1881): A member of the People's Will and wife of Andrei Zhelyabov. She was hanged for her part in the assassination of Tsar Alexander II—the first woman to be executed in Russia for political reasons.

Pestel, Colonel Pavel Ivanovich (1793–1826): One of the chief ideologues of the revolutionary movement known as the Decembrists. Though a democrat in some respects, he believed in a strong, centralized government, with a secret police force to maintain order. He was hanged in July 1826, after the Decembrists' failed coup.

Peter the Great (1672–1725): Ruler of Russia and later the Russian Empire from 1682 until his death. His policies of Westernization and expansion transformed Russia into a major European power.

Petlyura, Simon Vasilyevich (1879–1926): The leader of the Ukrainian Nationalist movement, which was at its most powerful during 1918 and 1919.

Plekhanov, Georgy Valentinovich (1856–1918): A prominent Socialist philosopher, considered the founder of Russian Marxism.

Pushkin, Aleksandr Sergeyevich (1799–1837): Russia's greatest poet.

Pyatakov, Georgy Leonidovich (1890–1937): An Old Bolshevik and, after Lenin's death, a member of the Left Deviation. In 1936 he was accused of conspiring against the Soviet government with both Trotsky and the Nazis. He was executed in January 1937.

Repin, Ilya Yefimovich (1844–1930): The greatest Russian realistic painter, a member of the group known as the Peredvizhniki, or Wanderers.

Right Deviation (Right Opposition): A Communist Party faction opposed to Stalin in the late 1920s. The most important figures were Bukharin and Rykov. It was this faction that was most identified with the New Economic Policy.

Rykov, Aleksey Ivanovich (1881–1938): A prominent Old Bolshevik. Along with Bukharin, Rykov led the moderate wing of the Communist Party in the 1920s, promoting a partial restoration of the market economy under the New Economic Policy. In March 1938, along with Bukharin, Yagoda, and others, Rykov was tried at the third Moscow Trial, found guilty of treason, and executed.

Ryleyev, Kondraty Fyodorovich (1795–1826): A Russian poet and revolutionary, and one of the leaders of the Decembrist revolt.

Ryumin, Mikhail Dmitrievich (1913–1954): As deputy head of the MGB, he took the chief initiative in concocting what became known as the Doctors' Plot. After Stalin's death, the case against the doctors unraveled and Ryumin was arrested. He was tried in Moscow and shot in July 1954.

Saltykov-Shchedrin, Mikhail Yevgrafovich (1826–1889): A Russian editor, literary critic, and satirical novelist, especially popular in radical circles.

Sazonov, Yegor Sergeyevich (1879–1910): A member of the Socialist Revolutionary Party. In 1904 he assassinated Plehve, the minister of the interior. Sentenced to life imprisonment, he poisoned himself in protest against prison conditions.

Scriabin, Alexandr Nikolaevich (1872–1915): A Russian composer and pianist. His vision of art was close to that of the Russian symbolist poets.

Semyonov, Nikolay Nikolaevich (1896–1986): A Soviet physical chemist, awarded the 1956 Nobel Prize in Chemistry.

Shcherbakov, Aleksandr Sergeyevich (1901–1945): A Soviet statesman, military leader, and politician.

Shchors, Nikolay Aleksandrovich (1895–1919): A talented Ukrainian military commander, renowned for his personal courage during the Russian Civil War. Aleksandr Dovzhenko's film, *Shchors*, was awarded the State Prize of the Soviet Union in 1939.

Shevchenko, Taras Hryhorovych (1814–1861): A Ukrainian poet and artist, and the founder of modern Ukrainian literature.

Shostakovich, Dmitry Dmitrievich (1906–1975): The greatest Soviet composer.

Skuratov, Malyuta (d. 1573): One of the most brutal henchmen of Ivan the Terrible.

Socialist Revolutionary Party (SR): Founded in 1901–1902, this important political party inherited the mantle of the nineteenth-century populists. Like the earlier People's Will, the party's left wing, the Left SRs, believed in terrorism. The SRs were the largest party in the Constituent Assembly and enjoyed widespread support among the peasantry.

Stakhanov, Aleksey Grigoryevich (1906–1977): A Soviet miner who was reported, in September 1935, to have mined 227 tons of coal in a single shift. Stakhanov's record set an example throughout the country and gave birth to the Stakhanovite movement; workers who exceeded production targets became known as Stakhanovites.

Stalin, Iosif (né Iosif Vissarionovich Dzhugashvili, 1878–1953): General secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union's Central Committee from 1922 until his death. During the 1920s and early 1930s he gradually consolidated power until he became a dictator.

In a series of five-year plans, Stalin forced through a program of rapid industrialization. His policy of Total Collectivization (1929–1931) led to millions of peasants, derogatorily referred to as kulaks, being starved or murdered. In the late 1930s, Stalin launched what has become known as the "Great Terror." Like many others, Grossman sees this as having been directed against the Soviet elite and, above all against the Party elite, the Old Bolsheviks. It does, however, need to be emphasized that members of *any* social or national group which might conceivably have threatened Stalin were resettled, sent to the Gulag or executed; over 90% of the nearly 700,000 executions carried out in 1937 and 1938 were of kulaks and members of national minorities.

Stalin's refusal to heed warnings of a German invasion in 1941 led to a series of catastrophic defeats. Beginning in 1942, however, the Red Army recovered and, under Stalin's leadership, played a major role in the defeat of Nazi Germany. The Soviet Union went on to become one of just two superpowers in the postwar era.

Sudeikin, Georgy Porfiryevich (1850–1883): Head of the Russian secret police, or the Third Section. He ran an important double agent, Sergey Degaev, who eventually assassinated him (see entry on Degaev). It has been suggested that Sudeikin's ultimate aim had been to remove the Tsar and run the country himself, from the Ministry of Internal Affairs.

Timashuk, Lydia Fedoseyevna (1898–1983): One of the physicians attending Andrey Zhdanov during his final illness. Making out that the treatment administered by the heart specialists had been inadequate, she denounced them to the secret police. No attention was paid to her report at the time; after the *Pravda* article about the Killer Doctors, however, Lydia Timashuk was awarded the Order of Lenin.

Tolstoy, Aleksey Nikolaevich (1883–1945): An extremely successful Russian writer, nicknamed the Comrade Count, who wrote in many genres but specialized in science fiction and historical novels. In his long historical novel *Peter the First*, he likens Stalin to Peter the Great. As well as being a distant relative of Leo Tolstoy, he is the grandfather of the contemporary writer Tatyana Tolstaya.

Trigoni, Mikhail Nikolaevich (1850–1917): A member of the revolutionary terrorist organization the People's Will.

Trotsky, Leon (né Lev Davidovich Bronstein, 1879–1940): After Lenin, the most important of the leaders of the October Revolution; founder and first commander of the Red Army. After leading the Left Deviation against Stalin, Trotsky was deported from the Soviet Union in 1929. He spent his last years in Mexico, where he was assassinated by one of Stalin's agents in 1940. Of all the Old Bolsheviks, Trotsky was the finest orator and the finest writer.

Vareikis, Iosif Mikhailovich (1894–1939): Old Bolshevik, who was executed in 1939.

Vinogradova, Evdokiya Viktorovna (1914–1962): A weaver who, in 1935, set new production records in the textile industry; the female equivalent of Stakhanov.

Virchow, Rudolf (1821–1902): A German doctor and public health activist, known as the father of pathology.

Vovsi, Miron Semyonovich (1897–1960): One of the most eminent Soviet doctors, arrested at the time of the Doctors' Plot but released after Stalin's death. First cousin of the actor Solomon Mikhoels.

Vyshinsky, Andrey Yanuaryevich (1883–1954): A lawyer and diplomat, notorious for his vicious speeches as chief prosecutor during the Moscow Trials.

Weissman, Friedrich Leopold August (1834–1914): An important German biologist and evolutionary theorist, opposed to Lamarck's belief in the inheritance of acquired characteristics.

Wrangel, Baron Pyotr Nikolaevich (1878–1928): Commander in chief of the White Army in the Crimea in the later stages of the Civil War.

Yagoda, Genrikh Grigoryevich (1891–1938): Head of the NKVD from 1934 to 1936. Arrested in 1937, tried at the last of the Moscow Trials in March 1938, and shot soon afterward.

Yezhov, Nikolai Ivanovich (1895–1940): Head of the NKVD during the Great Purge, from September 1936 until November 1938. During this period roughly half of the Soviet political and military establishment was imprisoned or shot. Arrested in 1939, Yezhov was shot in 1940.

Yudenich, Nikolay Nikolaevich (1862–1933): A leader of the White forces in northwestern Russia during the civil war.

Zavenyagin, Avraamy Pavlovich (1901–1956): An NKVD colonel general. From 1938 he was in charge of the labor camps of Norilsk. In May 1945, he was appointed head of a team sent to Germany to search for scientists working in the area of nuclear technology.

Zhdanov, Andrey Aleksandrovich (1896–1948): An important Soviet politician, in charge of Soviet cultural policy from 1946 until his death. He is notorious above all for his attacks on Anna Akhmatova and Mikhail Zoshchenko in 1946.

Zhelyabov, Andrey Ivanovich (1851–1881): A Russian revolutionary and a member of the executive committee of the People's Will. One of the organizers of the assassination, on March 1, 1881, of Tsar Alexander II. Although he was arrested, by chance, a few days before the assassination, he demanded that his case be considered with that of the other conspirators. He was executed along with them.

Zinoviev, Grigory Yevseyevich (1883–1936): A prominent Old Bolshevik. During Lenin's illness, Zinoviev, his close associate Kamenev, and Stalin formed a ruling troika in the Communist Party, successfully marginalizing Leon Trotsky. In early 1925 their troika began to crumble. In late 1925, Stalin, in alliance with Bukharin, succeeded in removing Kamenev and Zinoviev from real power.

Zinoviev and Kamenev then formed a United Opposition along with Trotsky. Zinoviev, Kamenev, and Trotsky were expelled from the Communist Party in late 1927. After twice being readmitted to the party only to be re-expelled, Zinoviev and Kamenev were arrested and sentenced to prison in December 1934. In August 1936, Zinoviev, Kamenev, and fourteen others were tried again in the first of the Moscow Trials. Zinoviev was executed in August 1936.

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R.C.

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EVERYTHING FLOWS

VASILY GROSSMAN

INTRODUCTION BY
ROBERT CHANDLER

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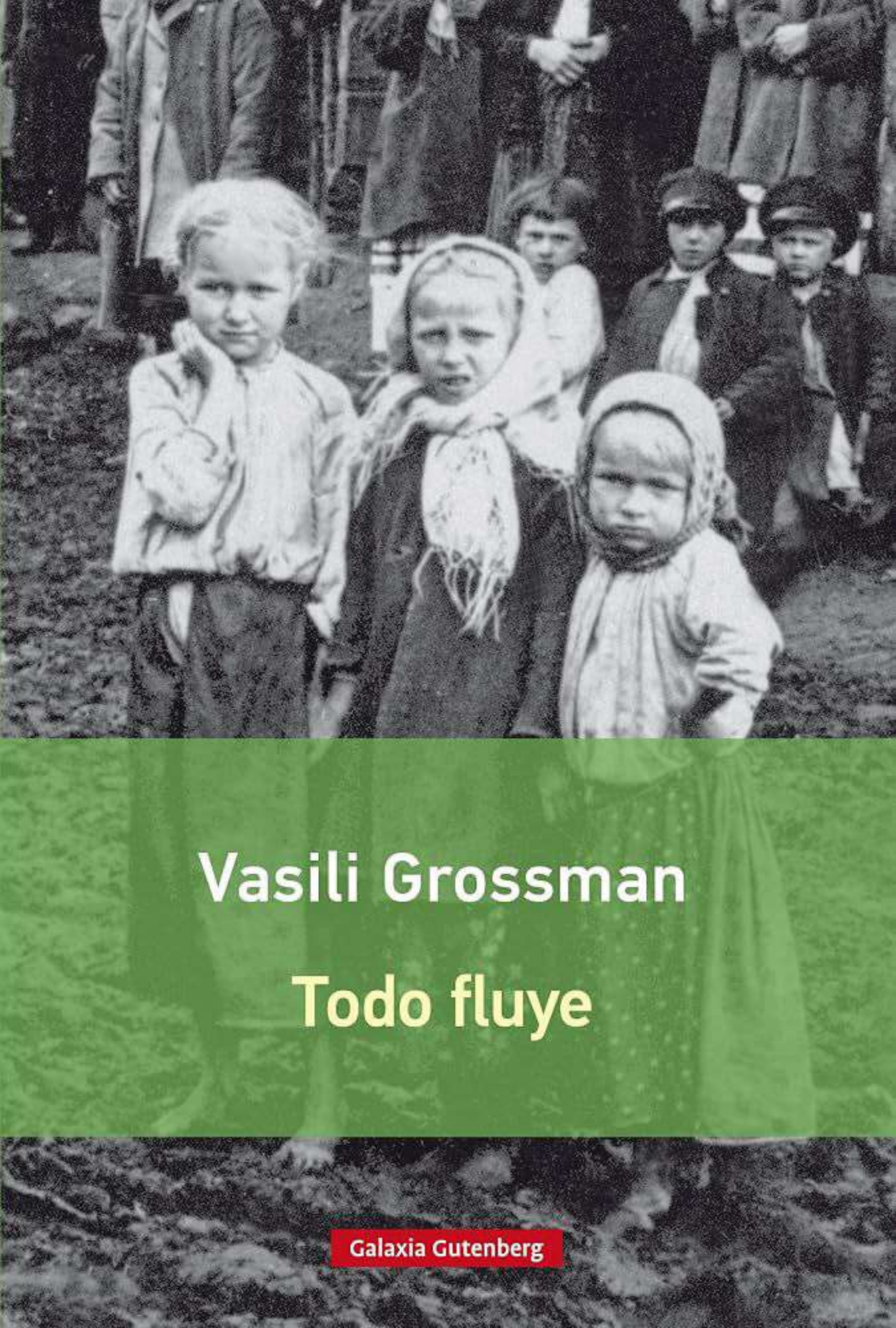

Vasili Grossman

Todo fluye

Galaxia Gutenberg

Presentamos la novela que Vasili Grossman completó cuando ya sabía que nunca vería publicada su obra maestra, Vida y destino. Al igual que ésta, Todo fluye es una obra conmovedora y valiente sobre un momento despiadado, un retrato de la condición humana en toda su grandeza y su miseria. Grossman sintió que no podía dejar de escribirla aunque nunca viera la luz porque era necesario que alguien contara la verdad. Vida y destino situó a Grossman como uno de los grandes autores del siglo xx; su última novela lo confirma como un hombre honesto que buscaba la verdad.

Moscú, 1954, un año después de la muerte de Stalin. Mientras espera la llegada de su primo Iván, que regresa tras treinta años en prisiones y campos de trabajo, Nikolai siente remordimientos porque ni una vez en todo este tiempo ha escrito a su primo ni ha contestado a sus cartas, pero ¿qué otra cosa podía hacer? En esta última novela, su testamento político y literario, Grossman disecciona la naturaleza del régimen estalinista, y de cualquier totalitarismo por extensión, en todos sus aspectos y en todas sus terribles consecuencias.

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TODO FLUYE

VASILI GROSSMAN

Traducción de

Marta Rebón

1

EL tren procedente de Jabarovsk llegaba a Moscú a las nueve de la mañana. Un joven en pijama se rascó la cabeza desgreñada y miró por la ventanilla la penumbra de la mañana otoñal. Luego, bostezando, se dirigió a las personas que hacían cola en el pasillo con toallas y jaboneras en la mano.

—Ciudadanos, ¿quién es el último?

Detrás del tipo que sostenía un tubo de dentífrico retorcido y un trozo de jabón envuelto en papel de periódico, le explicaron, iba una mujer corpulenta que se había ausentado momentáneamente de la cola.

—¿Por qué hay sólo un baño abierto? —preguntó el joven— Nos acercamos al final del trayecto, a la capital, pero los encargados de los vagones sólo se ocupan de intercambiar mercancías; no tienen tiempo para atender a los pasajeros como es debido.

Al cabo de unos minutos apareció la mujer corpulenta que vestía una bata, y el joven le dijo:

—Ciudadana, voy detrás de usted. Mientras tanto me vuelvo a mi compartimento, así no doy vueltas por el pasillo.

Una vez allí, el joven abrió una maleta anaranjada y admiró su contenido.

Uno de sus compañeros de compartimento, de nuca gorda e hinchada, roncaba; otro, un joven calvo de tez sonrosada, ordenaba los papeles de su portafolio, y el tercero, un viejo enjuto con la cabeza apoyada en sus puños ennegrecidos, miraba por la ventanilla.

El joven le preguntó al pasajero de tez sonrosada:

—¿No va a leer más? Tengo que meter el libro en la maleta.

Deseaba que aquel hombre admirara su maleta y lo que había en su interior: camisas de viscosa, un *Diccionario abreviado de filosofía*, un traje de baño y unas gafas de sol con la montura blanca. En un rincón, envueltas en un periódico de provincias, tenía unas galletas grises, caseras, como las que hacen los campesinos.

El pasajero le respondió:

—¡Cómo no, aquí tiene! Ese libro, *Eugenia Grandet*, lo leí el año pasado en un balneario.

—Una obrita admirable, huelga decirlo —dijo el joven, y metió el libro en la maleta.

Se habían pasado el viaje jugando a las cartas, bebiendo, comiendo, hablando acerca de películas, discos, mobiliario, los balnearios de Sochi, la agricultura socialista, qué equipo de fútbol tenía la mejor línea ofensiva, si el Dinamo o el Spartak...

El calvo sonrosado trabajaba en una ciudad de provincias en calidad de instructor del Consejo Central de los sindicatos de la URSS; el joven desgreñado, después de pasar sus vacaciones en el campo, volvía a Moscú, donde trabajaba como economista en el Gosplán[1] de la RSFSR[2].

El tercer viajero, que roncaba todavía en la litera de abajo, era jefe de obra en Siberia, y disgustaba a los otros dos por sus modales groseros: soltaba tacos, eructaba después de comer y, al enterarse de que uno de sus compañeros de viaje trabajaba en el Gosplán, en la sección de ciencias económicas, le preguntó:

—¿Economía política? ¿Qué es eso? ¿Tiene que ver con los koljosianos, que van del campo a la ciudad para comprar pan a los obreros?

Había bebido más de la cuenta en la cantina de una estación de enlace donde, en palabras propias, había corrido a *fichar*; y luego, durante un buen rato, había impedido coger el sueño a sus compañeros sin parar de rezongar:

—En el ramo de la construcción, si se actúa conforme a la ley, no se obtiene nada; y si quieres cumplir con el plan hay que trabajar como la vida exige: «Favor con favor se paga». En tiempos de los zares, a eso se le llamaba iniciativa privada. Nuestra versión, en cambio, es: «Deja al hombre vivir, él quiere vivir». ¡Eso sí que es economía! En mi obra, durante todo un trimestre, hasta que no llegó la nueva partida presupuestaria, mis soldadores estuvieron registrados como niñeras de un jardín de infancia. ¡La ley va contra la vida, pero la vida tiene sus exigencias! Si cumples con el plan, te conceden aumentos y primas, pero de paso también pueden endilgarte diez años. La ley va contra la vida, y la vida va contra la ley.

Los jóvenes habían permanecido callados, y cuando el jefe de obra se apaciguó —para ser más exactos, no es que se apaciguara sino que se puso a roncar ruidosamente— lo reprobaron:

—A los tipos como éste no hay que perderlos de vista. Fingen ser leales...

—Un aprovechado. Un hombre sin principios. Uno de esos judíos.

Les irritaba que aquel hombre tan vulgar, que venía de un lugar remoto, les tratara con desprecio. Unos días antes les había dicho:

—En mi obra trabajan algunos reclusos. Ellos, a los que son como ustedes,

los llaman *pridurki*[3], pero llegará el día en que empiecen a comprender quién ha construido el comunismo, y entonces se verá que sois como la mosca que le dijo a la muía: «¡Estamos arando!».

Dicho lo cual, se fue al compartimento vecino a jugar a las cartas.

Era evidente que el cuarto viajero estaba poco acostumbrado a viajar en un vagón con asientos reservados. Había permanecido la mayor parte del tiempo sentado con las manos sobre las rodillas, como si quisiera ocultar los remiendos de sus pantalones. Las mangas de su camisa de satén negro terminaban en algún lugar entre las muñecas y los codos, y los botoncitos blancos sobre el cuello y el pecho le conferían un aspecto infantil. Había algo ridículo y conmovedor en aquella combinación de botoncitos blancos infantiles en la ropa de un hombre con las sienes canosas y los ojos atormentados.

Cuando el jefe de obra le ordenó con voz acostumbrada al mando: «Abuelo, deje libre el puesto de la mesita, que ahora voy a tomar el té», el viejo se levantó de sopetón, como acatando una orden militar; y salió al pasillo.

En su maleta de madera con la pintura desconchada llevaba, junto a la ropa blanca desgastada de tanto lavarla, una hogaza de pan que se desmigajaba. Fumaba *majorka*, un tabaco muy áspero y basto, y después de liarse un cigarrillo salió a fumárselo al pasillo para no molestar a los otros pasajeros con el mal olor.

Sus compañeros de viaje le ofrecían de vez en cuando embutido, y el jefe de obra, en una ocasión, le obsequió con un huevo duro y una copita de vodka.

Todos lo tuteaban, incluso los que eran el doble de jóvenes que él, y el jefe de obra no dejaba de tomarle el pelo diciendo que el «abuelo» se haría pasar por soltero en la capital y se casaría con una joven.

Un día, en el compartimento, la conversación había girado en tomo a los koljoses, y el joven economista despotricó contra los campesinos holgazanes.

—Ahora lo he comprobado con mis propios ojos. Se reúnen cerca de la junta directiva del koljós y se pasan el rato rascándose la cabeza. Para empujarlos al trabajo, el presidente y los jefes de brigada sudan la gota gorda. Y luego los koljosianos se quejan de que en tiempos de Stalin no les pagaban el jornal y que ahora apenas cobran algo.

El inspector sindical, que estaba barajando concienzudamente un juego de cartas, lo apoyó:

—¿Por qué hay que pagarle a esa buena gente si no cumple con el plan de entrega? Hay que hacer que aprendan la lección... ¡así! —Y agitó su puño grande de campesino en el aire, un puño blanco porque había perdido la costumbre de

trabajar en el campo.

El jefe de obra se acarició el torso robusto del que prendían condecoraciones con los lazos manchados de grasa:

—A nosotros, en el frente, no nos faltaba el pan; fue el pueblo ruso el que nos alimentó. Y nadie tuvo que enseñarle la lección.

—Es cierto —dijo el economista— De hecho lo más importante es que somos rusos. Sí, ser ruso no es moco de pavo.

El inspector sonrió y guiñó el ojo a su compañero de viaje.

—Y quien dice ruso dice hermano mayor: *primus ínter pares*!

—Es por eso que me hierve la sangre —dijo el joven economista—. Estamos hablando de rusos, no de miembros de minorías nacionales. Uno me espetó: «Durante cinco años hemos comido hojas de tilo, no hemos cobrado nuestros jornales desde 1947». No les gusta trabajar. No quieren entender que ahora todo depende del pueblo.

Echó un vistazo al campesino canoso que escuchaba en silencio la conversación y dijo:

—Tú, abuelo, no te enfades. Vosotros no cumplís con vuestras obligaciones laborales, y el Estado os ha dado la espalda.

—¡Qué más les da, a ellos! —dijo el jefe de obra— No tienen la más mínima conciencia, sólo quieren comer todos los días.

Aquella conversación quedó inacabada, como la mayoría de las que se mantienen en los trenes. Un comandante de aviación cuyos dientes de oro relucían asomó la cabeza por el compartimento y les dijo a los jóvenes en tono de reproche:

—Y bien, camaradas, ¿y si nos ponemos a trabajar?

Y se fueron a acabar la partida al compartimento de al lado.

Pero llega el final del largo viaje... Los pasajeros guardan sus zapatillas en las maletas, dejan sobre las me— sitas pedazos de pan seco, huesos de pollo roídos hasta quedar azulados, restos de embutido envueltos en piel que se han vuelto blanquecinos...

Las adustas mozas de los vagones ya han pasado a recoger la ropa de cama arrugada.

Pronto el pequeño mundo del vagón se dispersará. Y se olvidarán las bromas, los rostros, las risas, los destinos casualmente explicados y el dolor

casualmente expresado.

La enorme ciudad, la capital del gran Estado, cada vez está más cerca. Desaparecen ya los pensamientos y las preocupaciones del viaje. Están olvidadas las conversaciones con una compañera de viaje en la plataforma del vagón, donde ante la mirada, tras los cristales sucios, pasa corriendo la gran planicie rusa y, detrás, a las espaldas, se oye el gorgoteo del agua en las cisternas.

Se disipa el mundo estrecho de los vagones surgido pocos días atrás, un mundo igual por sus leyes a todos los demás mundos creados por los hombres, que se mueven rectilíneos o curvilíneos en el espacio y el tiempo.

Grande es la fuerza de la enorme ciudad. Oprime incluso los corazones de la gente despreocupada que va a la capital de visita, para recorrer las tiendas y ver el zoológico y el planetario. Cualquiera que caiga en el campo de fuerzas en el que están extendidas las líneas invisibles de la energía viva de esta ciudad universal se siente repentinamente atenazado por la angustia, la confusión.

El economista por poco no había perdido su turno en la cola para ir al baño. Y ahí está, regresa a su asiento mientras se atusa el pelo y mira a sus compañeros de viaje.

El jefe de obra ordena las hojas de los presupuestos con los dedos temblorosos; ha bebido mucho durante el viaje.

El inspector sindical se ha puesto ya la chaqueta y guarda silencio, intimidado a medida que cae en el campo de fuerzas de las preocupaciones humanas: qué le diría la colérica y canosa vieja, encargada de supervisar a los inspectores del Consejo Central de los sindicatos de la URSS.

El tren pasa corriendo por delante de las casitas rurales de troncos y las fábricas de ladrillos, por delante de los campos de col del color del estaño, por delante de los andenes de la estación donde la lluvia nocturna ha dejado charcos sobre el asfalto gris.

En los andenes se ven sombríos habitantes de los alrededores de Moscú con impermeables de plástico sobre el abrigo. Los cables de alta tensión se curvan bajo las nubes grises. En las vías muertas están estacionados vagones de carga, grises y siniestros: «Estación Matadero, línea de circunvalación».

Y el tren retumba y corre cada vez más rápido, con una especie de alegría maliciosa. Una velocidad que aplasta, escinde el espacio y el tiempo.

El viejo sentado al lado de la mesita miraba por la ventana, con las sienes apoyadas en los puños. Muchos años antes, cuando era un joven con el pelo enmarañado, estaba sentado de la misma manera frente a la ventanilla de un

vagón de tercera clase. Y aunque las personas que viajaban con él en el vagón hubieran desaparecido, y él mismo hubiese olvidado sus caras y sus palabras, sentía revivir dentro de su canosa cabeza aquello que, al parecer, ya no existía.

Y el tren había entrado ya en el cinturón verde de los alrededores de Moscú. El humo gris hecho jirones se aferraba a las ramas de los abetos y, empujado por las corrientes de aire, se derramaba sobre las vallas de las dachas. Qué familiares eran las siluetas de aquellos severos abetos nórdicos, qué extraños eran a su lado las vallas azules de estacas, los tejados puntiagudos de las dachas, los cristales abigarrados de las terrazas y los parterres cubiertos de dalias.

Y el hombre, que durante tres largas décadas no se había acordado ni una vez de que en el mundo existían lilas, pensamientos, senderos de jardín espolvoreados de arena, carritos de vendedores de agua con gas, emitió un suspiro pesado al comprobar de nuevo una vez más que la vida, sin él, había continuado, había seguido su curso.

2

DESPUÉS de leer el telegrama, Nikolái Andréyevich lamentó la propina que le había dado al cartero. El mensaje, a todas luces, no iba dirigido a él; después, de repente, cayó en la cuenta y lanzó un grito: era un telegrama de su primo Iván.

—¡Masha! ¡Masha! —llamó a su mujer.

María Pávlovna cogió el telegrama:

—Sabes muy bien que sin gafas no veo nada. Venga, dámelas... Vaya, no creo que le concedan la residencia en Moscú.

—¡Bah, no hables ahora de eso! —Nikolái Andréyevich se pasó la palma de la mano por la frente y añadió—: Pensar que Vania llegará y no encontrará más que tumbas, sólo tumbas.

María Pávlovna dijo, pensativa:

—¿Y los Sokolov? ¡Qué situación tan embarazosa! Mandaremos el regalo, pero no está bien de todos modos; cumple cincuenta años, es una fecha señalada.

—No importa, se lo explicaré.

—Y después de la cena de cumpleaños correrá por todo Moscú la noticia de que Iván ha vuelto y que desde la estación fue directo a verte.

Nikolái Andréyevich sacudió el telegrama en las narices de su mujer.

—¿Es que no entiendes el lugar que Iván ocupa en mi corazón?

Estaba enfadado con su mujer: aquella tontería que María Pávlovna acababa de decir se le había pasado a él por la cabeza antes incluso de que ella abriera la boca. No era la primera vez que le ocurría. Precisamente por eso montaba en cólera, porque veía en ella sus propias debilidades, pero no se daba cuenta de que lo que le irritaba eran sus propios defectos, y no los de ella. Le resultaba fácil, sin embargo, olvidarse pronto de aquellas discusiones porque se amaba: perdonándola a ella se perdonaba a sí mismo.

Ahora le volvía a la mente, con obstinación, aquella estúpida idea del cincuenta aniversario de Sokolov. La noticia de la llegada de su primo lo había trastornado porque su propia vida, llena de verdades y mentiras, se había erguido ante él. Y se avergonzaba de sentirse triste porque fuera a perderse la cena de gala de los Sokolov, donde esperaba su acogedora licorera de vodka.

Se avergonzaba de la mezquindad de esas consideraciones, y es que también a él le había asaltado la idea de todas las dificultades que acarrearían los trámites para obtener el permiso de residencia de Iván, que todo Moscú se enteraría de su regreso y que aquel incidente podía repercutir en sus posibilidades de ser elegido para la Academia...

Y María Pávlovna continuaba atormentando a Nikolái Andréyevich porque expresaba en voz alta los pensamientos —casuales e imaginarios, sin base real alguna— que a él le asediaban; los sacaba a la luz del día.

—¡Qué rara eres! —dijo—. Creo que habría sido más agradable recibir este telegrama cuando tú no hubieses estado en casa.

Aquellas palabras la ofendieron, pero sabía que Nikolái Andréyevich no tardaría en abrazarla y le diría:

—Masha, Masha, compartamos esta alegría. ¿Con quién podría compartirla sino contigo?

Y eso fue lo que pasó; pero ella hizo una mueca de descontento y resignación, que era su manera de responderle: «Tus cariñosas palabras no me causan ningún placer, pero lo soportaré con paciencia».

Luego, sus ojos se encontraron, y el sentimiento del amor reparó todo lo malo.

Habían vivido veintiocho años sin separarse. Resulta difícil comprender la relación que existe entre dos personas que han convivido casi un tercio de siglo.

Ahora ella, con el cabello cano, se acercaba a la ventana y miraba cómo él, también con el cabello cano, se subía al coche. ¡Y pensar que hubo un tiempo en que los dos comían en una cantina de estudiantes de la calle Bronnaya!

—Kolia[4] —dijo María Pávlovna, con voz queda—. Iván nunca vio a nuestro Valia. Cuando lo arrestaron, Valia todavía no había nacido, y ahora que por fin vuelve, hace ya ocho años que Valia está en la tumba.

Ese pensamiento la consternó.

3

MIENTRAS esperaba a su primo, Nikolái Andréyevich pensaba en su vida y se preparaba para arrepentirse de ella ante Iván. Se imaginaba cómo le mostraría la casa: «Aquí, en el comedor, hay una alfombra de Turkmenistán; qué demonios: mírala, es bonita, ¿no?». Masha tiene buen gusto, no es ningún secreto para Iván quién era su padre: en la vieja Petersburgo, gracias a Dios, la gente sabía vivir.

¿Qué le diría a Iván? Habían pasado décadas, había transcurrido una vida. No, precisamente de aquello era de lo que hablarían: ¡la vida no había transcurrido! ¡Sólo ahora comenzaba!

¡Sí, iba a ser un encuentro en toda regla! Iván llegaba en un momento extraordinario. Cuántos cambios se habían producido después de la muerte de Stalin, cambios que concernían a todos. También a los obreros, también a los campesinos. ¡Había pan para todo el mundo! Y era justo ahora cuando Iván regresaba de un campo de prisioneros. Y no sólo él. En la vida de Nikolái Andréyevich también habían tenido lugar muchos cambios decisivos.

Desde sus años de estudiante, Nikolái Andréyevich sentía sobre sí el peso del fracaso. Ese peso le resultaba especialmente atormentador porque le parecía injusto. Era culto, trabajaba mucho y se le consideraba un conversador ingenioso; las mujeres caían rendidas a sus pies.

Estaba orgulloso de su reputación de hombre honesto y de principios, pero rehuía la hipocresía mojigata: le gustaban los chistes alegres durante la cena, conocía a la perfección la complicada graduación de los vinos secos y a menudo desdeñaba el vino y se pasaba al vodka.

Cuando los amigos elogiaban el carácter de Nikolái Andréyevich, María Pávlovna, mirando a su marido con ojos alegres y enfadados a un mismo tiempo, decía:

—Si vivierais con él bajo el mismo techo, descubriríais a un extraño Kolenka: un déspota, un loco, un egoísta de los que no se ven en el mundo.

A veces marido y mujer se irritaban hasta el límite de lo soportable, porque conocían todos los defectos y debilidades el uno del otro. En ocasiones incluso les parecía que sería un alivio separarse. Pero era sólo una impresión. Era evidente que no podían vivir el uno sin el otro; de haberse separado habrían sufrido enormemente.

María Pávlovna se había enamorado de Nikolái Andréyevich cuando todavía era una colegiala: su voz, su frente alta, sus dientes grandes, su sonrisa, todo lo que treinta años antes le había parecido extraordinario y hermoso, con el paso de los años le resultaba aún más querido.

Él también la amaba, pero su amor había cambiado. Lo que una vez había sido esencial en la relación con su mujer ahora había pasado a un segundo plano y, en cambio, las cosas que antes parecían insignificantes ahora ocupaban el primer lugar.

En otro tiempo María Pávlovna había sido bonita: alta, con los ojos oscuros. Conservaba la gracia de sus movimientos y sus ojos no habían perdido el encanto de la juventud. Pero ya de joven, y ahora más todavía, el atractivo de su cara se estropeaba con su sonrisa, que dejaba al descubierto una dentadura grande y prominente.

Desde los años de la universidad, Nikolái Andréyevich sufría de un modo enfermizo por su falta de éxito. No eran sus informes, preparados escrupulosamente, los que desataban la emoción de los participantes en los seminarios estudiantiles, sino los comentarios improvisados del pelirrojo Rodiónov o el borrachín de Pizhov.

Nikolái Andréyevich había sido nombrado investigador titular de un célebre instituto científico, había publicado decenas de trabajos y defendido la tesis doctoral. Pero sólo su mujer sabía los tormentos y humillaciones que había soportado.

A la vanguardia de su especialidad científica había un grupo de hombres. Uno era académico, otros dos ocupaban puestos inferiores al de Nikolái Andréyevich y el cuarto ni siquiera había obtenido el grado de candidato a doctor. Esos hombres apreciaban a Nikolái Andréyevich como interlocutor, valoraban su honradez pero, sinceramente y con toda benevolencia, no le consideraban un verdadero científico.

Sentía constantemente la atmósfera de tensión y admiración que acompañaba a aquellos hombres, especialmente al cojo Mandelshtam.

Una vez, una revista científica londinense había calificado a este último como «el gran continuador de la obra de los fundadores de la biología contemporánea». Cuando Nikolái Andréyevich leyó aquella frase, pensó que si alguna vez leyera semejantes palabras para referirse a él se moriría de alegría.

Mandelshtam se comportaba mal: tan pronto se mostraba lúgubre y abatido como daba explicaciones adoptando el tono arrogante de un maestro; a veces, cuando se reunían y bebía más de la cuenta, ridiculizaba a científicos que conocía,

tildándolos de ineptos y a algunos incluso de estafadores y mediocres. Ese rasgo de su carácter sacaba a Nikolái Andréyevich de sus casillas: Mandelshtam denigraba a personas de las que era amigo y cuyas casas frecuentaba. Y Nikolái Andréyevich sospechaba que si Mandelshtam estuviera de visita en casa de cualquier otro, también le tacharía a él, a sus espaldas, de inepto y mediocre.

Le irritaba también la esposa de Mandelshtam: una mujer gorda que había sido hermosa y a la que, por lo visto, sólo le interesaban las partidas de cartas y la gloria científica de su marido cojo.

Al mismo tiempo se sentía atraído por Mandelshtam; se decía que la vida no debía de resultar fácil para la gente como él, verdaderamente excepcional.

Pero cuando Mandelshtam le aleccionaba con indulgencia, Nikolái Andréyevich montaba en cólera, sufría y, de vuelta a casa, echaba pestes de aquel advenedizo.

María Pávlovna consideraba a su marido un hombre de gran talento. Nikolái Andréyevich le hablaba de la indiferencia condescendiente que los corifeos mostraban hacia sus trabajos, y la fe de ella en su marido se volvía cada vez más apasionada. Su admiración y su fe eran indispensables para él, al igual que el vodka lo es para el borracho. Pensaba que había gente que tenía suerte y otra que no, pero que, por lo general, todos eran iguales. Mandelshtam, sin ir más lejos, estaba marcado por una suerte especial, era como un *Benjamín el Afortunado* de la biología; en cuanto a Rodiónov, estaba rodeado de admiradores como un tenor de ópera, aunque a decir verdad no había el más mínimo parecido entre un tenor y Rodiónov, de nariz chata y pómulos salientes. Incluso Isaak Javkin parecía ser un tipo con suerte, a pesar de no haber obtenido el grado de candidato a doctor y de que le estaba vetado trabajar, incluso en los momentos de mayor calma, en cualquier instituto científico u otra institución importante por ser sospechoso de comulgar con las ideas del vitalismo. Y ahora, ese hombre con la cabeza ya canosa trabajaba en un laboratorio bacteriológico de provincias y llevaba un pantalón lleno de rotos. Pero había académicos que le visitaban para intercambiar puntos de vista, y en su mísero laboratorio llevaba a cabo investigaciones científicas sobre las que se hablaba y discutía largo y tendido.

Cuando comenzó la campaña contra los adeptos de Weismann, Virchow y Mendel, Nikolái Andréyevich se sintió muy afligido por la severidad de las medidas tomadas contra muchos de sus colegas. Y tanto él como María Pávlovna se apenaron cuando Rodiónov no quiso reconocer sus errores. Rodiónov fue despedido, y Nikolái Andréyevich, aunque furioso por ese insensato quijotismo, finalmente se las apañó para conseguirle traducciones del inglés.

A Pizhov lo acusaron de servilismo ante Occidente y lo enviaron a trabajar a un laboratorio experimental, en la región de Chkálov. Nikolái Andréyevich le escribió, le envió libros, y María Pávlovna preparó para su familia un paquete que les envió por Año Nuevo.

En los periódicos comenzaron a aparecer artículos satíricos que desenmascaraban a los arribistas y granujas que, de modo fraudulento, habían obtenido sus diplomas y grados académicos; a los médicos que trataban a los niños enfermos y a las parturientas con una crueldad criminal; a los ingenieros que, en lugar de hospitales y escuelas, construían dachas para sus familiares. Casi todas las personas denunciadas en esos artículos eran judías, y los periódicos daban sus nombres y patronímicos con un celo especial: «Srul Najmanovich... Jaim Abrámovich... Izraíl Mendelevich...». Si en una reseña se criticaba un libro escrito por un judío que usaba un pseudónimo literario ruso, se estampaba al lado, entre paréntesis, el apellido judío del autor. Parecía que en la URSS eran sólo los judíos los que robaban, aceptaban sobornos, se mostraban criminalmente indiferentes a los sufrimientos de los enfermos y escribían libros depravados y chapuceros.

Nikolái Andréyevich veía que aquellos artículos no les gustaban sólo a los porteros y a los pasajeros borrachos de los tranvías suburbanos. Esos artículos le sublevaban, pero al mismo tiempo se irritaba con sus amigos judíos que reaccionaban ante aquellos miserables escritos como si supusieran el fin del mundo. Se quejaban de que a los jóvenes judíos de talento no se les permitía el acceso a los estudios de doctorado, de que tampoco los admitían en la Facultad de Física, de que no los contrataban para trabajar en los ministerios, en la industria, ya fuera ligera o pesada, y de que una vez acabada la escuela superior, los judíos fueran enviados a las provincias más lejanas. Decían que cuando había reducción de personal despedían casi exclusivamente a los judíos.

Por supuesto, todo aquello era cierto, pero los judíos fantaseaban acerca de no sé qué grandioso plan estatal que los condenaba al hambre, a la degradación, a la muerte. Nikolái Andréyevich consideraba que el asunto se limitaba simplemente al trato hostil que dispensaban algunos hombres del Partido y de la clase obrera a los judíos, y que los departamentos de personal y las comisiones de admisión de la universidad no recibían instrucciones con respecto a los judíos. Stalin no era antisemita y seguramente no estaba al corriente de todo aquello.

Y además, no sólo eran los judíos los que sufrían: también la habían tomado con el viejo Churkovski, con Pizhov, con Rodiónov.

Mandelshtam, que había estado al cargo de la sección científica del instituto, se convirtió en un simple colaborador del mismo departamento en el que trabajaba Nikolái Andréyevich. No obstante, le permitían continuar llevando a cabo su

investigación, y el título de doctor le daba la posibilidad de percibir un buen salario.

Pero después de que se publicara en *Pravda* un editorial sin firma contra los críticos de teatro cosmopolitas —Gúrvich, Yuzovski y otros, que supuestamente se habían burlado del teatro ruso—, se inició una vasta campaña para desenmascarar a los cosmopolitas de todos los campos del arte y de la ciencia, en virtud de la cual Mandelshtam fue declarado un antipatriota. Bratova, la candidata a doctora en ciencias, escribió un artículo para el periódico mural: «A su regreso de un viaje lejano, Mark Samuilovich Mandelshtam enterró en el olvido los principios de la ciencia rusa soviética».

Nikolái Andréyevich visitó a Mandelshtam en su casa. Este estaba conmovido, triste, y su altiva esposa ya no parecía tan altiva. Bebieron vodka, Mandelshtam vituperó contra Bratova, que era su alumna; mesándose el pelo, se lamentaba de que apartaran de la ciencia a sus alumnos, jóvenes judíos con talento a raudales.

—¿Qué quieren? ¿Que vayan a vender artículos de mercería por los mercadillos? —preguntó.

—Venga, no hay por qué inquietarse, habrá trabajo para todos, para usted, para Javkin, e incluso para la auxiliar de laboratorio, Anechka Zilberman —dijo en tono burlón Nikolái Andréyevich—; todo se arreglará. Todo el mundo tendrá pan e incluso caviar.

—Dios mío —dijo Mandelshtam—, no se trata de caviar, sino de la dignidad humana.

Por lo que respecta a Javkin, sin embargo, Nikolai Andréyevich se había equivocado. El asunto tomó un mal cariz para él. Poco después de la publicación en los periódicos de la noticia sobre los médicos asesinos, Javkin fue detenido.

La noticia de que varias personalidades del ámbito de la medicina y el artista Mijoels habían cometido delitos monstruosos consternó a todos. Parecía que una bruma negra se cerniese sobre Moscú y penetrase en las casas y en las escuelas, se colase en los corazones de los hombres.

En la sección «Crónica», en la cuarta página, se publicó la noticia de que los médicos acusados se habían declarado culpables; por lo tanto, no había duda: eran criminales.

Y aunque aquello pareciera inconcebible, se hacía difícil respirar y trabajar sabiendo que profesores y académicos se habían convertido en los asesinos de Zhdánov y Scherbakov, en unos envenenadores.

Nikolái Andréyevich se acordaba del amable Vov— si y del excelente actor Mijoels, y le parecía increíble, inimaginable que hubieran podido cometer el crimen del que se les acusaba.

Pero ¡habían confesado! Si eran inocentes y se habían reconocido culpables, cabía suponer la existencia de otro crimen aún más espantoso que el que les imputaban: un crimen contra ellos.

Daba escalofríos sólo de pensarlo. Hacía falta ser muy audaz para dudar de su culpabilidad, ya que, entonces, los criminales serían los propios dirigentes del Estado socialista; en tal caso, el criminal sería Stalin.Sus amigos médicos le contaban que trabajar en los hospitales y las policlínicas se había vuelto difícil, un tormento. Los enfermos, influidos por los terribles comunicados oficiales, se habían vuelto suspicaces. Muchos se negaban a que los médicos judíos les curaran. Los médicos de cabecera explicaban que se recibía un gran número de quejas y denuncias por parte de la población acerca de tratamientos intencionadamente equivocados. En las farmacias, los clientes sospechaban que los farmacéuticos intentaban colocarles medicamentos envenenados; en los tranvías, en los mercados y en las instituciones se decía que en Moscú habían cerrado varias farmacias donde boticarios judíos —agentes norteamericanos— vendían píldoras de piojos desecados; se contaba que en las maternidades infectaban de sífilis a los recién nacidos y a las parturientas y que en las clínicas dentales inoculaban a los pacientes cáncer de mandíbula y de lengua. Se hablaba de cajas de cerillas que contenían fósforos envenenados. Algunas personas se acordaban de las circunstancias de la muerte de familiares fallecidos hacía mucho tiempo y escribían denuncias a los órganos de seguridad exigiendo que se llevaran a cabo investigaciones sobre los médicos judíos y se depuraran responsabilidades. Lo más triste era que no sólo los porteros, los cargadores y los conductores semianalfabetos y borrachínes daban crédito a estas historias, sino también algunos doctores en ciencias, escritores, ingenieros y estudiantes.

Aquella desconfianza general resultaba insoportable para Nikolái Andréyevich. Anna Naúmovna, la nariguda auxiliar de laboratorio, iba al trabajo pálida, con los ojos desencajados, dementes; una vez contó que una vecina que vivía en su mismo apartamento y que trabajaba en una farmacia había suministrado por error un medicamento que no le correspondía a un enfermo, y cuando la llamaron para dar explicaciones fue tal el horror que se apoderó de ella que se quitó la vida, dejando a dos huérfanos: una hija que cursaba estudios de música y un hijo en edad escolar. Anna Naúmovna ahora iba a pie al trabajo; en el tranvía los borrachos la asediaban con preguntas sobre los médicos judíos que habían matado a Zhdánov y Scherbakov.

Riskov, el nuevo director del instituto, le inspiraba repugnancia a Nikolái Andréyevich. Riskov decía que había llegado la hora de purgar la ciencia rusa de apellidos no rusos, y en una ocasión sentenció: «Es el fin de la sinagoga judía; si supierais cómo los odio...».

Y al mismo tiempo, Nikolái Andréyevich no había podido reprimir una alegría involuntaria cuando Riskov le dijo: «Los camaradas del Comité Central aprecian el trabajo que usted hace, el trabajo de un gran científico ruso».

Mandelshtam ya no trabajaba en el instituto: había encontrado una plaza como metodólogo en un centro de investigación. Nikolái Andréyevich lo invitaba a su casa y obligaba a su mujer a llamarlo por teléfono. Mandelshtam se había vuelto nervioso y desconfiado, y Nikolái Andréyevich se alegraba de que Mark Samuilovich le diera largas para verse porque sus encuentros cada vez resultaban más penosos. En épocas como aquélla, era más agradable rodearse de personas alegres.

Cuando Nikolái Andréyevich se enteró de la detención de Javkin, dijo a su mujer en un susurro, mirando de reojo el teléfono:

—Estoy convencido de que Isaak es inocente; lo conozco desde hace treinta años.

De repente ella lo abrazó y le acarició la cabeza.

—Estoy orgullosa de ti —dijo—. Cuánto te afliges por Javkin y Mandelshtam, y sólo yo sé hasta qué punto te ofendieron.

Eran tiempos difíciles. Nikolái Andréyevich tuvo que intervenir en un mitin sobre los médicos asesinos para hablar de la necesidad de vigilancia, de negligencia e indulgencia excesiva.

Después del mitin, Nikolái Andréyevich entabló conversación con el colaborador de la sección de fisio-química, el profesor Margolin, que también había pronunciado un largo discurso. En él, Margolin había exigido la pena de muerte para los médicos criminales y leyó un texto de bienvenida para Lidia Timashuk, que había desenmascarado a los médicos asesinos y a quien le habían concedido la Orden de Lenin. El tal Margolin era un experto en filosofía marxista; dirigía seminarios centrados en el estudio del *Curso breve de historia del Partido Comunista.*

—Sí, Samsón Abrámovich —dijo Nikolái Andréyevich—, son tiempos difíciles. Para mí no es sencillo hablar de estos temas. Pero usted, ¿cómo puede hablar de ellos?

Margolin enarcó sus cejas delgadas y, tensando el labio inferior, lívido y fino, le preguntó:

—Disculpe, no le entiendo. ¿A qué se refiere exactamente?

—No, a nada en particular —dijo Nikolái Andréyevich—. Bueno, ya sabe: Vovsi, Etinger, Kogan, quién lo iba a imaginar. Estuve ingresado en la clínica de Vovsi, el personal le quería; en cuanto a los pacientes, creían en él como si fuera el profeta Mahoma.

Margolin encogió sus hombros delgados, sus pálidas y exangües ventanas nasales aletearon levemente, y dijo:

—¡Ah, ya entiendo! ¿Usted cree que a mí, por ser judío, me resulta desagradable fustigar a esos monstruos? Al contrario, lo que a mí me parece abominable es el nacionalismo judío. Y si los judíos se sienten atraídos por Norteamérica y se convierten en un obstáculo para el avance del comunismo, no dudaría en sacrificarme a mí y a mi propia hija para deshacerme de ellos.

Nikolái Andréyevich comprendió que había sido inútil hablar del afecto que aquellos enfermos ilusos le profesaban a Vovsi. Si un hombre está dispuesto a sacrificar a su propia hija, hay que hablarle con clichés.

Y Nikolái Andréyevich le dijo:

—¡Cómo no! El fin último del enemigo está en nuestra unidad moral y política.

Sí, eran tiempos difíciles, y sólo una cosa consolaba a Nikolái Andréyevich: el trabajo le iba bastante bien.

Parecía que por primera vez se había escapado de los estrechos confines de su profesión para irrumpir en los dominios plenos de la vida, donde antes no le permitían entrar. La gente comenzó a ir a verle, a pedirle consejo, se alegraba de conocer su opinión. Las redacciones de las revistas científicas, por lo general indiferentes, empezaron a mostrar interés por sus artículos; una vez lo llamaron por teléfono desde la VOKS[5], una institución que antes nunca se había dirigido a él, y le pidieron que les enviara el manuscrito de su libro aún sin terminar. Querían plantear su posible publicación en los países de la democracia popular.

Nikolái Andréyevich, profundamente emocionado, acogía a su manera la llegada del éxito. María Pávlovna estaba más tranquila. Según ella, a Kolenka le estaba sucediendo lo que no podía no sucederle.

Entretanto, en la vida de Nikolái Andréyevich no paraban de sucederse cambios. La gente nueva que estaba al frente del instituto y lo había promovido no era de su agrado. Le provocaban rechazo su grosería, su ilimitada confianza en sí mismos, la manera en que tachaban a sus adversarios científicos de serviles, cosmopolitas, agentes del capitalismo, mercenarios del imperialismo. Pero sabía

ver en aquellos hombres nuevos lo que era realmente importante: la fuerza y el coraje.

Se había equivocado Mandelshtam al definirlos como idiotas incultos, «potros dogmáticos y obtusos».

No era la estrechez de miras lo que les caracterizaba sino la pasión y la perseverancia, una perseverancia orientada hacia la vida y que engendraba vida. Por eso odiaban a los talmudistas y a los teóricos abstractos.

Y ellos, los nuevos jefes del instituto, aunque percibían en Nikolái Andréyevich a una persona con puntos de vista y costumbres distintos, le trataban con simpatía, confiaban en él en tanto que ruso. Recibió una calurosa carta de Lisenko en la que elogiaba su manuscrito y le invitaba a trabajar con él.

Nikolái Andréyevich no veía con buenos ojos las teorías de Lisenko, pero la carta del famoso académico agrónomo le resultó agradable. Después de todo, los trabajos de Lisenko no se podían rechazar en bloque. Y además, los rumores de que era un tipo muy peligroso para sus adversarios científicos y que en las discusiones le gustaba recurrir a métodos policiales y denuncias eran, sin duda, exagerados.

Riskov había propuesto a Nikolái Andréyevich que pronunciara un discurso sobre lo que él llamaba el desprestigio científico de los cosmopolitas expulsados de la ciencia biológica. Nikolái Andréyevich se había negado, a pesar de notar el descontento del director, que quería que la opinión pública escuchase la voz airada de un científico ruso no afiliado al Partido.

En aquella época corría la voz de que en Siberia oriental se estaba construyendo a toda prisa una enorme ciudad de barracones. Decían que aquellos barracones se construían para los judíos. Los deportarían como habían deportado a los calmucos, los tártaros de Crimea, los búlgaros, los griegos, los alemanes del Volga, los bálcaros y los chechenos.

Nikolái Andréyevich comprendió que se había equivocado al prometerle a Mandelshtam canapés de caviar.

Su inquietud iba en aumento mientras esperaba el proceso de los médicos asesinos. Por la mañana hojeaba los periódicos: ¿todavía no había comenzado? Como todos, conjeturaba si sería un proceso público. Y a menudo le preguntaba a su mujer:

—¿Tú qué crees? ¿Publicarán una crónica del proceso día a día, con la exposición del fiscal, los interrogatorios, la última palabra de los imputados, o bien sólo comunicarán el veredicto del tribunal militar?

Una vez le explicaron a Nikolái Andréyevich, de manera estrictamente confidencial, que los médicos serían ejecutados públicamente en la Plaza Roja y que, después de eso, se desataría una oleada de pogromos contra los judíos por todo el país, y que aquel momento coincidiría con la deportación de los judíos a la taiga y a Karakum, para la construcción del canal de Turkmenistán. Aquella deportación se acometería para defender a los judíos de la justa pero despiadada ira popular. Aquella deportación expresaría el espíritu eternamente vivo del internacionalismo que, aun comprendiendo la ira del pueblo, no puede admitir los linchamientos en masa y los ajustes de cuentas.

Como todo lo que sucedía en el país, esa revuelta espontánea contra los crímenes sangrientos de los judíos había sido concebida y organizada de antemano.

Del mismo modo, Stalin planeaba las elecciones al Soviet Supremo: los objetivos se fijaban por anticipado, se designaba a los diputados y entonces, según lo previsto, se daba inicio a la promoción espontánea de los candidatos y la propaganda electoral y, finalmente, llegaban las elecciones generales. De la misma manera se decretaban los tempestuosos mítines de protesta, las explosiones de ira popular y las manifestaciones de la amistad fraternal; y así también, varias semanas antes de los desfiles festivos, se controlaban las crónicas radiofónicas que se transmitirían desde la Plaza Roja: «En este momento veo avanzar los tanques a toda velocidad...». De idéntico modo se describía anticipadamente la iniciativa personal de Izótov, Stajánov, Dusia Vinográdova, las adhesiones en masa a los koljoses, se nombraba o se revocaba a los héroes legendarios de la guerra civil, se decretaban las reivindicaciones de los obreros de invertir el salario en empréstitos del Estado, de trabajar sin días de descanso; de la misma manera se declaraba el amor de todo el Pueblo hacia el *Vozhd*[6], se fijaban de antemano los nombres de los agentes secretos de los países extranjeros, los saboteadores, los espías que, tras arduos interrogatorios cruzados, suscribían actas en las que contables, ingenieros, consultores jurídicos —que hasta hacía poco ignoraban ser secuaces contrarrevolucionarios— confesaban actividades varias en el campo del espionaje terrorista. De la misma manera se redactaban los textos de las cartas que las madres, con voz inexpresiva, leían ante los micrófonos dirigiéndose a sus hijos soldados; del mismo modo se planeaba por adelantado la contribución patriótica del koljosiano Ferapont Golovati, y del mismo modo se designaba a los participantes de los foros en los que, si por alguna razón era necesario celebrarlos, se urdían y acordaban de antemano los discursos de los mismos.

Y de repente, el 5 de marzo de 1953 murió Stalin. Esa muerte irrumpió en el gigantesco sistema de entusiasmo mecanizado, de ira y de amor popular decretado por orden de los Comités regionales del Partido.

Stalin murió sin que estuviera planificado, sin la indicación correspondiente de los órganos directivos. Murió sin la orden personal del propio camarada Stalin. En aquella libertad, en aquella autonomía de la muerte había algo explosivo que contradecía la esencia íntima del Estado. Una confusión total se apoderó de las mentes y de los corazones.

¡Stalin había muerto! Algunos se sobrecogieron por el dolor: en ciertas escuelas los profesores obligaron a los alumnos a arrodillarse y, arrodillados también ellos y llorando a lágrima viva, leían el comunicado oficial de la muerte del *Vozhd*. Durante las asambleas funerarias, en las instituciones y en las fábricas muchos se sumieron en un estado de histerismo; se oían sollozos, gritos de mujeres fuera de sí, algunos se desvanecían. Había muerto el gran dios, el ídolo del siglo xx, y las mujeres sollozaban...

A otros les embargó un sentimiento de felicidad. El campo, desfallecido bajo el peso de la mano de hierro de Stalin, suspiró aliviado. El júbilo invadió a millones y millones de personas confinadas en los campos... Columnas de presos marchaban al trabajo en medio de las espesas tinieblas. El bramido del océano ensordecía el ladrido de los perros guardianes. Y de repente, como la luz de la aurora boreal, un clamor surgió de las filas: «¡Stalin ha muerto!». Decenas de miles de reclusos escoltados se transmitían la noticia los unos a los otros, susurrando: «La ha palmado... la ha palmado...», y aquel susurro de miles y miles de personas aulló como el viento. La negra noche reinaba sobre la tierra polar. Pero el hielo del océano glacial se había roto, y el océano rugía.

No pocos científicos y obreros, al enterarse de la noticia, sintieron confundirse dentro de sí el dolor con las ganas de bailar de felicidad.

El desaliento había cundido en el momento en que la radio había transmitido el informe médico de Stalin: «Respiración de Cheyne-Stokes..., orina..., tensión arterial...». El soberano divinizado exhibió de repente su carne débil y senil.

¡Stalin ha muerto! En aquella muerte había un elemento de espontaneidad repentina, infinitamente extraña a la naturaleza del Estado estalinista.

Lo inesperado del hecho hizo estremecerse al Estado, como lo había hecho temblar el ataque imprevisto que se abatió contra él el 22 de junio de 1941.

Millones de personas querían ver el cuerpo del difunto. El día del funeral de Stalin no sólo todo Moscú sino también las provincias, las regiones, se precipitaron a la Casa de los Sindicatos, donde se había instalado la capilla ardiente. Una cola de camiones procedentes de las provincias se extendía a lo largo de muchos kilómetros. El atasco de circulación llegó hasta Sérpujov y bloqueó la carretera que

enlaza Sérpujov y Tula.

Millones de personas se dirigieron a pie hasta el centro de Moscú. Torrentes de gente, como negros ríos crujientes en el deshielo, impactaban entre sí, se aplastaban contra las piedras, se retorcían y despedazaban los coches, arrancaban de los goznes las puertas de metal. Aquel día murieron miles de personas. Las desgracias acaecidas el día de la coronación del zar en Jodinka empalidecieron en comparación con el día de la muerte del dios terrenal ruso, picado de viruelas e hijo de un zapatero de la ciudad de Gori.

Parecía que la gente iba al encuentro de la muerte en un estado de arrobamiento, con un sentimiento místico, cristiano o budista, de perdición irremediable. Era como si Stalin, el gran pastor, liquidara a las ovejas aún sin sacrificar, eliminando póstumamente el elemento de casualidad de su terrible plan general.

Reunidos en una asamblea, los colaboradores de Stalin leían monstruosos boletines de la milicia de Moscú, de las morgues, y se intercambiaban miradas. Su confusión iba ligada a una sensación nueva para ellos: la ausencia de miedo ante la ira inevitable del gran Stalin. El amo y señor había muerto.

La mañana del 5 de abril, Nikolái Andréyevich despertó a su mujer con un grito desesperado:

—¡Masha! ¡Los médicos no son culpables! ¡Los sometieron a torturas, Masha! El Estado ha reconocido su terrible culpa, ha confesado que utilizaron métodos de interrogatorio no permitidos por la ley.

Después de un primer momento de felicidad y una luminosa sensación de alivio espiritual, Nikolái Andréyevich experimentó por primera vez en su vida un sentimiento desconocido: algo turbio, tormentoso.

Un sentimiento nuevo, extraño y particular, un sentimiento de culpabilidad. Se reprochaba su debilidad moral, su intervención en el mitin, su firma en la carta colectiva que condenaba a los monstruosos médicos, su disposición a aceptar una mentira notoria, el hecho de que aquel consentimiento había nacido en él voluntariamente, con sinceridad, del fondo de su alma.

¿Había vivido correctamente? ¿Era de veras un hombre honesto como todos a su alrededor le consideraban?

Crecía, se reforzaba en su alma aquel sentimiento tormentoso, de penitencia.

En la hora que el infalible Estado divinizado confesaba sus crímenes, Nikolái Andréyevich tomó conciencia de su terrena carne mortal: el Estado, al igual que

Stalin, tenía crisis cardiacas y albúmina en la orina.

La divinidad, la infalibilidad del Estado inmortal, no sólo oprimía al individuo sino que también lo protegía y lo consolaba de su debilidad, justificaba su nulidad: el Estado cargaba sobre su espalda de hierro todo el peso de la responsabilidad, liberaba a los hombres de la quimera de la conciencia.Y Nikolái Andréyevich se sentía como si estuviese completamente desnudo, como si miles de miradas extrañas estuvieran observando su cuerpo desnudo.

Y lo más desagradable de todo era que él también se encontraba entre la multitud, se miraba a sí mismo desnudo junto a todos los demás: examinaba su pecho caído, como el de una mujer, su vientre arrugado, hinchado por el exceso de comida, los pliegues de grasa en los costados.

Sí, Stalin tenía palpitaciones y un pulso filiforme, el Estado excretaba orina y Nikolái Andréyevich estaba desnudo bajo el traje de paño inglés.

Oh, qué desagradable resultaba aquel examen de sí mismo; era increíblemente repugnante la lista de infamias.

En ella figuraban asambleas generales, sesiones del Consejo científico, conmemoraciones solemnes y festivas, reuniones relámpago del laboratorio, artículos y dos libros, banquetes y visitas a gente importante y despreciable, las votaciones, las bromas de sobremesa, las conversaciones con los cuadros dirigentes y las firmas suscribiendo cartas, y las recepciones en casa del ministro.

Pero en el pergamino de su vida había habido numerosas cartas de otro tipo: las que no había escrito, aunque Dios le hubiera mandado escribirlas. Había silencio allí donde Dios había ordenado pronunciarse. Había una llamada telefónica que tendría que haber hecho y no hizo. Había visitas que era pecado no realizar y que no realizó; había dinero, telegramas no enviados. Eran muchas, muchísimas las cosas que figuraban en el inventario de su vida.

Y era absurdo ahora, completamente desnudo, sentirse orgulloso de lo que siempre se había sentido orgulloso: de no haber denunciado nunca a nadie; de que una vez, citado en la Lubianka, se había negado a dar información que comprometiera a un colega arrestado; de que, al encontrarse por la calle con la mujer de un compañero deportado, no le había dado la espalda sino que le había estrechado la mano mientras le preguntaba por la salud de sus hijos. De todo aquello, ¿de qué podía sentirse orgulloso...?

Toda su vida consistía en un gran y prolongado acto de obediencia; ni una vez había desobedecido.

Por ejemplo, con Iván: durante treinta años, Iván había deambulado por

cárceles y campos penitenciarios, y Nikolái Andréyevich, que se sentía orgulloso de no haber renegado nunca de él, no le había escrito ni una sola vez durante aquellos treinta años. Cuando Iván le escribió, Nikolái Andréyevich le pidió a una vieja tía que respondiera aquella carta.

Todo lo que antes le parecía natural había comenzado a angustiarle, a roerle.

Se acordó de que, en un mitin celebrado con motivo de los procesos de 1937, había votado a favor de la pena de muerte para Ríkov y Bujarin.

Durante diecisiete años no se había acordado de aquellos mítines, y ahora, de repente, los recordaba.

En aquella época le había parecido extraño, insensato, que un profesor del instituto de ingenieros de minas, cuyo nombre había olvidado, y el poeta Pasternak se hubieran negado a votar a favor de la pena de muerte de Bujarin. De hecho, los mismos malhechores habían confesado durante el proceso. Fueron interrogados a puertas abiertas por Andréi Yanuárievich Vishinski. No había duda de su culpa, ¡ni sombra de duda!

Y ahora, de repente, Nikolái Andréyevich recordó que había tenido dudas. Sólo fingía que no las tenía. De hecho, aunque hubiera estado convencido en el fondo de su alma de la inocencia de Bujarin, de todas maneras habría votado a favor de la pena de muerte. Le había resultado más cómodo no dudar y votar, así que había fingido ante sí mismo que no tenía dudas. Y no había podido dejar de votar porque creía en los grandes objetivos del Partido de LeninStalin. Creía que por primera vez en la historia se había construido una sociedad socialista, sin propiedad privada, y que para el socialismo era necesaria la dictadura del Estado. Dudar de la culpabilidad de Bujarin, negarse a votar, habría significado dudar del potente Estado y de sus grandes objetivos.

Pero aun con aquella fe sagrada, en algún rincón del fondo de su alma anidaba la duda.

¿Era aquello el socialismo: los campos de Kolimá, el canibalismo durante la colectivización, la muerte de millones de personas? A veces, de los recovecos profundos de su conciencia emergían otros pensamientos: el terror había sido demasiado inhumano y demasiado grandes los sufrimientos de los obreros y los campesinos.

Sí, sí, había pasado la vida inclinándose, obedeciendo, con miedo al hambre, a la tortura, a los campos de prisioneros siberianos. Pero también había habido otra clase de miedo: el de recibir caviar rojo en lugar de caviar negro. Y por aquel vil miedo, el miedo del caviar, fueron sacrificados los sueños de juventud de los tiempos del comunismo de guerra. Era preciso no dudar, votar sin miramientos,

firmar. Sí, sí, el miedo por el propio pellejo y el miedo a perder el caviar negro habían alimentado su fuerza ideológica.

Y de repente el Estado tuvo un sobresalto y musitó que los doctores habían sido torturados. Y mañana el Estado reconocerá las torturas a las que fueron sometidos Bujarin, Zinóviev, Kámenev, Ríkov, Piatakov, y que a Maksim Gorki no le asesinaron los enemigos del pueblo. Y pasado mañana el Estado reconocerá que millones de campesinos fueron liquidados en vano.

Y no será el Estado todopoderoso e infalible el que asumirá todo eso sino que le tocará responder a Nikolái Andréyevich; era él quien no dudaba, el que votaba a favor de todo y estampaba su firma cada vez que se lo pedían. Había aprendido a fingir tan bien, a engañarse a sí mismo con tanta destreza, que nadie, ni siquiera él mismo, notaba ese fingimiento. Se sentía sinceramente orgulloso de su fe y de su pureza.

La sensación de tormento, de desprecio hacia sí mismo era por minutos tan grande que hacía aflorar un reproche amargo y penetrante contra el Estado: ¿por qué, por qué había confesado? ¡Habría sido mejor callarse! No tenía derecho a confesar su culpa. ¡Que todo siguiera siendo igual que antes!

Quién sabe lo que debía de sentir el profesor Margolin, que había declarado que sería capaz de sacrificar no sólo a los médicos asesinos sino a sus propios hijos por la gran causa del internacionalismo.

Era insoportable tener sobre su conciencia tantos años de infame sumisión.

Pero poco a poco aquella desazón comenzó a apaciguarse. Parecía que todo había cambiado y, al mismo tiempo, todo parecía ser como antes.

El trabajo en el instituto se volvió incomparablemente más fácil, más tranquilo. Se vio particularmente claro el día que Riskov provocó el descontento de las instancias superiores con su grosería y fue destituido del puesto de director.

El éxito con el que Nikolái Andréyevich había soñado finalmente llegó. Y no fue un éxito establecido por la administración del instituto o el aparato gubernamental sino un éxito auténtico, grandioso. Lo sentía en muchas cosas: en los artículos de las revistas, en las declaraciones de los participantes en las conferencias científicas, en las miradas de admiración de sus colegas y de los auxiliares de laboratorio, en las cartas que había comenzado a recibir.

Nikolái Andréyevich entró a formar parte del Consejo científico superior, y poco después, la presidencia de la Academia confirmó su nombramiento como director científico del instituto.

Nikolái Andréyevich quería que se readmitiera a los cosmopolitas y a los

idealistas expulsados, pero fue imposible convencer a la jefa del departamento de personal, una mujer guapa y amable, pero extraordinariamente terca. Lo único que consiguió fue que asignaran trabajos temporales a las personas despedidas.

Y ahora, mirando a Mandelshtam, Nikolái Andréyevich pensaba: ¿era posible que este hombre miserable e impotente, que llevaba al instituto paquetes de traducciones y de notas, fuera considerado en el extranjero, algunos años atrás, un eminente científico, uno de los grandes? ¿Era posible que Nikolái Andréyevich hubiese ansiado ardientemente contar con su aprobación?

Antes Mandelshtam se vestía con negligencia y ahora iba al instituto con su mejor traje.

Nikolái Andréyevich bromeaba a este respecto, y Mandelshtam le dijo: «Un actor en paro debe ir siempre bien vestido».

Y ahora, al recordar su vida pasada, experimentaba, ante el inminente encuentro con Iván, un sentimiento extraño, amargo, alegre. En un tiempo se había formado en la familia la opinión de que Vania superaba en inteligencia y talento a todos sus coetáneos, y Nikolái Andréyevich también estaba convencido de ello, o más bien no lo estaba del todo, e incluso, en el fondo de su alma, no lo estaba en absoluto, pero se había sometido.

Vania leía con facilidad y rapidez los libros de matemáticas y de física, los comprendía a su manera, de una forma original que no tenía nada de académica. Desde niño reveló su talento para la escultura; sabía plasmar vivamente en el barro lo observado en la vida: la expresión de una cara, un gesto extraño, la particularidad de un movimiento. Además de su interés por las matemáticas, se sentía atraído por todo lo referente al Oriente antiguo, lo cual era verdaderamente insólito, y conocía bien todo lo que se había escrito sobre los manuscritos y los monumentos de Parda.

Desde la infancia se combinaban extrañamente en su carácter rasgos que nunca se encuentran en una sola persona.

Una vez, este joven realista, en el transcurso de una pelea, le había hecho sangre en la cabeza a su adversario, lo que le valió pasarse dos días en comisaría. Y al mismo tiempo era tímido, apocado, sensible. En un rincón apartado de la casa había montado un hospital donde vivían animales lisiados: un perro al que le faltaba una pata, un gato ciego, una chova triste con un ala arrancada.

Cuando estudiaba en la universidad, Iván reunía en sí curiosamente la delicadeza, la bondad y la timidez con una intransigencia tan despiadada que hacía que incluso sus más allegados le guardaran rencor.

Tal vez aquellos rasgos de su carácter explicaran el hecho de que Iván no hubiera justificado las esperanzas depositadas en él: su vida quedó truncada, y él mismo contribuyó a arruinarla hasta el final.

En la década de 1920, muchos jóvenes de talento no podían estudiar a causa de su procedencia social: los hijos de nobles, de militares zaristas, de sacerdotes, de industriales y de comerciantes no eran admitidos en los centros de enseñanza superior.

Iván sí pudo entrar en la universidad: procedía de una familia de trabajadores intelectuales. Superó fácilmente la feroz depuración de la universidad basada en el criterio de clase.

Y si Iván ahora hubiera comenzado a vivir de nuevo, las actuales dificultades ligadas al quinto punto del cuestionario —la nacionalidad— no le habrían afectado.

Pero con todo, si Iván hubiese comenzado a vivir ahora de nuevo, sin duda habría tomado de nuevo el camino del fracaso.

Así, no se trataba de una cuestión de circunstancias externas. El destino desafortunado y amargo de Iván dependía de sí mismo.

En la universidad, en su círculo de estudios filosóficos, Iván mantenía violentas discusiones con los profesores de materialismo dialéctico. Las discusiones se prolongaron hasta que el grupo fue disuelto.

Entonces Iván intervino en el auditorio contra la dictadura: declaró que la libertad era un bien igual a la vida misma, que la restricción de la libertad mutilaba a los hombres igual que los golpes de hacha, que cortan dedos y orejas, y que la destrucción de la libertad equivalía al asesinato. Después de aquel discurso, fue expulsado de la universidad y deportado por tres años a la región de Semipalatinsk.

Desde entonces habían transcurrido cerca de treinta años, y durante aquellas décadas Iván no había pasado más de un año en libertad. La última vez que Nikolái Andréyevich lo vio fue en 1936, poco antes de un nuevo arresto, después del cual pasó diecinueve años sin interrupción en campos penitenciarios.

Durante mucho tiempo sus amigos de la infancia y sus compañeros de estudios le habían recordado; decían: «Iván sería ahora un académico». «Sí, era un hombre excepcional, pero no tuvo suerte.» Otros, en cambio, aseveraban: «De todos modos, estaba loco».

Ania Zamkovskaya, el amor de Iván, se acordó de él, sin duda, mucho más que los otros.

Pero el tiempo hizo su trabajo. Y ahora ya tampoco Ania —la enferma y encanecida Anna Vladimirovna— preguntaba por Iván cuando se la encontraban.

Había desaparecido de la conciencia de la gente, de sus corazones, ya fueran fríos o ardientes; existía en secreto, y cada vez surgía con más dificultad en la memoria de aquellos que lo habían conocido.

Pero entretanto el tiempo trabajaba sin apresurarse, concienzudamente: aquel hombre que primero había sido borrado de la vida, migrando en el recuerdo de la gente, que después había perdido el permiso de residencia incluso en la memoria, había ido a parar al subconsciente, de donde saltaba de vez en cuando como el muñeco de una caja sorpresa, asustando por lo inesperado de su aparición momentánea.

Y el tiempo seguía tranquilamente haciendo su trabajo, sencillo y terrenal, e Iván ya había dado un paso para abandonar el sombrío sótano del subconsciente de sus amigos e instalarse en el dominio de la no existencia, en el olvido eterno.

Pero llegaron nuevos tiempos, los tiempos post-estalinistas, y el destino quito que Iván volviera a caminar nuevamente por aquella misma vida que había dejado de pensar en él, que había olvidado su imagen.

4

NO llegó hasta el anochecer.

En aquel encuentro se mezclaron el enojo por la rica cena que se había echado a perder a causa del retraso, la inquietud, las exclamaciones por el pelo encanecido, por las arrugas, por la vida transcurrida. Los ojos de Nikolái Andréyevich se humedecieron —así gorgotea el agua caída repentinamente durante una tormenta en los barrancos áridos y arcillosos— y María Pávlovna se puso a llorar recordando de nuevo al hijo muerto.

La cara oscura y arrugada, el chaquetón guateado y los torpes andares en las botas militares de ese hombre salido del reino de los campos no encajaban con aquel mundo de suelos de parqué, armarios de libros, cuadros, lámparas de araña.

Reprimiendo su nerviosismo, mirando a su primo con los ojos nublados por las lágrimas, Iván Grigórievich dijo:

—Nikolái, antes de nada quiero decirte esto: no vengo a pedirte nada, ni el permiso de residencia, ni dinero ni todo lo demás... Por cierto, ya he estado en una casa de baños, no tengo parásitos.

Nikolái Andréyevich, enjugándose las lágrimas, se echó a reír.

—Canoso y con arrugas, pero es nuestro Vania, el mismo de siempre. —Y dibujó un círculo en el aire, y después pinchó con un dedo aquel círculo imaginario—. ¡Insoportable, derecho como una vela, y al mismo tiempo, el diablo sabrá cómo, el mejor de los hombres!

María Pávlovna miró a Nikolái Andréyevich: aquella mañana había intentado convencer a su marido de que sería mejor que Iván Grigórievich se aseara en una casa de baños; en el baño de casa nunca podría lavarse igual de bien, y además, después de que Iván se bañara, no conseguiría limpiar la bañera con ácido ni con lejía.

Aquella conversación fútil no sólo estaba hecha de palabras ligeras sino también de sonrisas, miradas, movimientos de manos, toses, y todo aquello ayudaba a descubrir, a explicar, a comprender de nuevo.

Nikolái Andréyevich tenía muchas ganas de hablar de sí mismo, muchas más que de recordar la infancia, enumerar a los parientes muertos o hacerle preguntas a Iván. Pero como era una persona educada, capaz de hacer y decir

aquello que no le apetecía, dijo:

—Tendríamos que ir a alguna parte, quizás a una dacha, donde no haya teléfonos, para escucharte hablar durante una semana, un mes, dos meses.

Iván Grigórievich se imaginó a sí mismo sentado en la butaca de una dacha, degustando un buen vino y hablando de personas que habían desaparecido en la oscuridad eterna. El destino de muchos de ellos era de una tristeza tan lacerante que incluso la más tierna, la más suave y bondadosa palabra acerca de ellos sería como si una mano ruda y áspera tocase un corazón desnudo, desgarrado. No se podía hablar de ello.

Y, moviendo la cabeza, dijo:

—Sí, sí, sí: el cuento de las mil y una noches polares.

Estaba emocionado. ¿Dónde estaba él, el verdadero Kolia era aquel con la camisa de satén gastada y un libro de inglés bajo el brazo, alegre, gracioso y servicial, o era este, de mejillas grandes y suaves y una calvicie cérea?

Iván había sido fuerte toda su vida. La gente siempre se dirigía a él para pedirle que les explicara alguna cosa, que les tranquilizara. Incluso los habitantes de la *India*[7] criminal del campo penitenciario le pedían su opinión. Un día logró detener una pelea a cuchillazos entre *ladrones* y *perros*[8]. Gozaba del respeto de gente muy variopinta: ingenieros saboteadores, un viejo harapiento que había sido caballero de la guardia real zarista, un teniente coronel del ejército de Denikin, un maestro de la sierra de arco, un ginecólogo de Minsk acusado de nacionalismo burgués judío, un tártaro de Crimea, que protestaba entre dientes porque su pueblo había sido expulsado de las costas del mar cálido a la taiga, un koljosiano que se había apropiado de un saco de patatas con el fin de no volver al koljós: después de haber purgado su pena, intentaría obtener, con el certificado del campo, un pasaporte de seis meses para la ciudad.

Pero ese día sólo deseaba que unas manos buenas le quitasen el peso de las espaldas. Y sabía que había una única fuerza ante la cual resultaba bueno y maravilloso sentirse pequeño y débil: la fuerza de una madre. Pero hacía mucho tiempo que ya no tenía madre, y nadie podía quitarle aquel peso.

Nikolái Andréyevich sentía nacer dentro de sí una sensación extraña, totalmente involuntaria.

Mientras esperaba a Iván, había pensado con ternura que sería sincero con él hasta el final, como nunca en la vida lo había sido con nadie. Tenía ganas de confesarle todos los sufrimientos de su conciencia, de hablarle con humildad de su debilidad, amarga y vil.

Que Iván lo juzgara. Que le entendiera, si podía; si no podía, que le perdonara; y si no le entendía ni le perdonaba, pues bueno, era igual. Estaba emocionado, las lágrimas le velaban la vista, y se repetía una y otra vez para sus adentros los versos de Nekrásov:

Se inclinó el hijo ante el padre,

Le lavó los pies al viejo...

Tenía ganas de decirle a su primo: «Vania, Vánechka, te sonará raro, es extraño, pero te envidio. Te envidio porque, en ese terrible campo, no tuviste que firmar cartas infames, votar a favor de la condena a muerte de seres inocentes, pronunciar discursos ruines...».

Pero apenas había visto a Iván, un sentimiento inesperado, radicalmente opuesto, había nacido en su interior. El hombre del chaquetón guateado, las botas de soldado, con la cara corroída por el frío y el aire irrespirable de los barracones, le pareció extraño, malo, hostil.

Ya había experimentado aquella clase de sentimiento durante sus viajes al extranjero. Le parecía inconcebible, imposible hablar de sus dudas con aquellos extranjeros bien cuidados, hacerlos partícipes de las penurias vividas. Con ellos no hablaba de sus inquietudes sino sólo de cosas importantes e indiscutibles: de los logros históricos del Estado soviético. Se defendía de los extranjeros, defendía a la patria.

¿Acaso podía haber imaginado que Iván le suscitaría un sentimiento semejante? ¿Por qué? ¿Cuál era el motivo? Y sin embargo había ocurrido así.

Ahora le parecía que Iván había venido para tachar su vida. Ahora Iván le humillaría, le hablaría con altivez, con indulgencia.

Y él tenía unas ganas locas de hacer comprender a Iván, de explicarle que todo había cambiado y se había vuelto diferente, que todos los viejos valores estaban borrados, que él, Iván, estaba vencido, destruido, y que su amargo destino no era una casualidad. Sí, sí, un estudiante fracasado con el cabello cano... ¿Qué tenía a las espaldas, qué le deparaba el porvenir?

Y tal vez porque quería decirle así de obstinada y apasionadamente todas aquellas cosas a Iván, Nikolái Andréyevich dijo exactamente lo contrario.

—Es sorprendente lo bien que está todo. En lo esencial, Vania, tú y yo somos iguales. Y yo también quiero decirte una cosa: si hay momentos en que tienes la sensación de haber perdido decenas de años, de haber echado a perder tu vida, sobre todo cuando te encuentres con gente que ha pasado estos años escribiendo libros y esas cosas en lugar de trabajar como leñadores o terraplenadores, por favor ¡deshazte de esas ideas! Lo importante, Vánechka, es que eres igual a los que han hecho avanzar la ciencia, a los que han tenido éxito en la vida y en el trabajo.

Y sintió su voz temblar de emoción, y su corazón oprimirse dulcemente.

Vio la turbación de Iván, vio lágrimas de emoción nublar de nuevo los ojos de su mujer.

Lo cierto es que él quería a Iván, lo había querido toda su vida. A María Pávlovna nunca le había parecido percibir con tanta plenitud la fuerza espiritual de su marido como en aquellos minutos en los que había querido confortar al desdichado Iván. Ella sabía bien quién era el vencedor y quién el vencido.

Era verdaderamente extraño, pero ni siquiera cuando la limusina Z1S había llevado a Nikolái al aeropuerto de Vnúkovo para viajar a la India, donde debía presentar la delegación de científicos soviéticos al primer ministro Nehru, María Ivánovna había sentido con tanta intensidad ese sentimiento de haber triunfado en la vida. El de hoy, a decir verdad, era un sentimiento del todo particular porque mezclaba las lágrimas que ella derramaba por su hijo muerto, con la piedad, con el cariño hacia aquel hombre canoso que calzaba unas botas bastas.

—Vania —dijo—. Le he preparado todo un armario con ropa; de hecho, tiene la misma estatura que Kolia.

María Pávlovna no había escogido un buen momento para hablar de ropa vieja, y Nikolái Andréyevich dijo:

—¡Dios mío! Qué necesidad hay de hablar de esas tonterías... Naturalmente, Vania, es de todo corazón...

—No es una cuestión de corazón —respondió Iván Grigórievich— Lo cierto es que tú eres tres veces más grueso que yo.

La mirada atenta e incluso se diría que un tanto compasiva de Iván mortificó a María Pávlovna. Por lo visto, el hecho de que su marido se hubiera mostrado especialmente modesto había impedido que Iván se desembarazara de su antigua actitud de condescendencia hacia Nikolái Andréyevich.

Iván Grigórievich bebió vodka y su rostro adquirió un rubor marrón oscuro.

Preguntó por los viejos conocidos.

Hacía décadas que Nikolái Andréyevich no había visto a la mayoría de sus viejos amigos; muchos de ellos ya no estaban entre los vivos. Todo lo que les unía —preocupaciones y trabajos comunes— había desaparecido; sus caminos se habían separado, igual que se habían esfumado la compasión y la tristeza por aquellos que, sin derecho a correspondencia[9], se habían ido para no volver. Nikolái Andréyevich no tenía ganas de recordarlos, al igual que no es apetecible acercarse a un tronco solitario y seco alrededor del cual sólo hay tierra polvorienta y muerta.Tenía ganas de hablar de amigos que Iván Grigorievich no conocía. Era a ellos a quienes estaban ligados los acontecimientos de su vida. Hablando de ellos, llegaría a lo esencial: hablaría de sí mismo.

Sí, era el momento de liberarse de aquel gusano que roe a todo intelectual, tenía que deshacerse de aquel sentimiento de culpabilidad, de ilegitimidad por todo lo maravilloso que le había pasado. No quería arrepentirse sino afirmarse.

Y se puso a hablar de personas que le habían mostrado un bondadoso desprecio, que no le habían comprendido ni valorado, de personas que hoy estaba dispuesto a ayudar con toda el alma.

—Kolenka —intervino de repente María Pávlovna—, háblale de Ania Zamkovskaya.

Al instante marido y mujer sintieron la agitación de Iván Grigorievich.

—Ella te escribía, ¿verdad? —preguntó Nikolái Andréyevich.

—Su última carta es de hace dieciocho años.

—Sí, sí, está casada. Su marido es físico—químico, en fin... Se dedica a cuestiones nucleares. Viven en Leningrado, imagínatelo, en el apartamento donde vivió durante un tiempo con sus padres. La vemos a menudo durante las vacaciones, en otoño... Antes preguntaba siempre por ti, pero después de la guerra, a decir verdad, dejó de hacerlo.

Iván Grigorievich tosió y dijo con la voz enronquecida:

—Creía que estaba muerta: dejó de escribirme.

—Hablemos de Mandelshtam —dijo Nikolái Andréyevich—. ¿Te acuerdas del viejo Zaozerski? Mandelshtam era su alumno preferido. Zaozerski desapareció en 1937. Cuando viajaba al extranjero, se encontraba libremente con emigrados y desertores, tipos como Ipatiev, Chichibabin... Bueno, volviendo a Mandelshtam: subió rápido como la espuma, y luego... bien, el final ya te lo he contado: lo acusaron de ser un cosmopolita y otras cosas... Todo eso es absurdo, por supuesto, pero lo cierto es que, empujado por Zaozerski, mantenía numerosas relaciones con científicos europeos y americanos.

Nikolái Andréyevich pensó que contaba todo aquello no para sí mismo, sino para Iván: porque Iván vivía con ciertas ideas infantiles, caducas; había que ponerle al día. Pero entonces un pensamiento le asaltó: «¡Dios mío, hasta qué punto ha enraizado en mí la hipocresía!».

Miró las manos humildes y ennegrecidas de Iván y comenzó a explicar:

—Tal vez te resulte un tanto confusa esta terminología: cosmopolitismo, nacionalismo burgués, el significado del quinto punto del cuestionario. El cosmopolitismo vendría a ser más o menos lo mismo que la participación en un complot monárquico en tiempos del primer congreso del Komintern. Pero seguro que tú a todos esos ya los verías en los campos: los que ocupaban los puestos de los expulsados eran a su vez destituidos y se convertían en tus compañeros de catre. Pero no creo que eso sea una amenaza ahora: el proceso de cambio se ha completado. El elemento nacional ha mudado, en estas décadas, del dominio de la forma al dominio del contenido, de una manera grandiosa y sencilla. Mucha gente, no obstante, no es capaz de comprender esa simplicidad. Mira, si a uno lo expulsan, no quiere aceptarlo como consecuencia de un proceso histórico normal, lo ve sólo como una absurdidad, un error. Pero un hecho sigue siendo un hecho. Nuestros científicos, nuestros técnicos, han creado aviones rusos soviéticos, pilas de uranio rusas y máquinas electrónicas; a esa supremacía en el campo científico debería corresponderle una supremacía política: el elemento ruso ha entrado en el dominio del contenido, de la base, del fundamento...

Habló de su odio a las Centurias negras[10]. Pero al mismo tiempo veía que Mandelshtam y Javkin, hombres indiscutiblemente dotados y capaces, estaban ofuscados; según ellos, todo lo que sucedía era fruto del antisemitismo y nada más. Y Pizhov, Rodiónov y los demás tampoco entendían que no se trataba sólo de la brutalidad y la intolerancia de Lisenko[11] sino de la ciencia nacional que los nuevos hombres sostenían.

Iván Grigórievich le observaba con ojos atentos, y Nikolái Andréyevich sintió agitarse en su alma esa inquietud que experimentaba de niño, cuando sentía que se posaba sobre él la mirada triste de su madre y entendía, aunque vagamente, que no debía hablar así, que no estaba bien. Con el deseo de apaciguar aquella sensación confusa, razonaba de modo particularmente serio, cordial:

—He pasado por muchas pruebas —dijo Nikolái Andréyevich, con voz sincera y afligida—. He vivido una época difícil, dura. Por supuesto, no soné como La campana de Herzen. No he desenmascarado a Beria ni los errores de Stalin, sería absurdo pretender algo parecido.

Iván Grigórievich bajó la cabeza, y era imposible saber si dormitaba o

soñaba en algo remoto, o bien si meditaba en las palabras de Nikolái Andréyevich. Sus manos estaban inmóviles, la cabeza hundida entre los hombros. Tenía la misma actitud que el día antes, en el tren, cuando escuchaba a sus compañeros de viaje. Nikolái Andréyevich dijo:

—Lo pasé mal en tiempos de Yagoda y en tiempos de Yezhov, pero ahora que ya no están ni Beria, ni Abakúmov, ni Riumin, ni Merkúlov ni Kobúlov empiezo a volar con mis propias alas. Ante todo, duermo tranquilo, no espero visitantes nocturnos. Y no soy el único. Y sin querer uno piensa que no soportamos en vano aquellos tiempos crueles. Ha nacido una vida nueva y todos participamos en la medida de nuestras posibilidades.

—Kolia, Kolia —dijo en voz baja Iván Grigórievich. Esas palabras irritaron a María Pávlovna. Al igual que su marido, había notado la expresión compasiva y lúgubre en la cara del huésped.En tono de reproche, le dijo a su marido:

—¿Por qué tienes miedo de decir que Mandelshtam y Pizhov son unos ególatras? No hay que lamentar que la vida los haya puesto en su lugar. Gracias a Dios que lo ha hecho.

Recriminaba a su marido, pero el reproche iba dirigido al huésped. Después, alarmada por sus bruscas palabras, añadió:

—Voy a preparar la cama. Vania está muy cansado y no lo hemos tenido en cuenta.

Iván Grigórievich, que ya había comprendido que la visita a su primo, lejos de procurarle alivio le acarrearía nuevas angustias, le preguntó con gravedad: —Dime, ¿firmaste aquella carta que condenaba a los médicos asesinos? Oí hablar de ello en el campo por la gente que fue arrestada.

—Querido, sigues siendo el mismo excéntrico de siempre... —dijo Nikolái Andréyevich, pero se le entrecortó la voz y se quedó callado.

Sintió que de la angustia se le helaba la sangre en las venas, y que al mismo tiempo estaba sudando, ruborizado, que las mejillas le ardían.

Sin embargo, no se arrodilló y finalmente dijo: —Amigo mío, amigo mío, no sólo para vosotros, en los campos, la vida ha sido difícil; también lo ha sido para nosotros.

—¡Dios me libre! —se apresuró a decir Iván Grigórievich—, no te juzgo, ni a ti ni a nadie. ¿Qué clase de juez sería yo? Pero ¿qué te has pensado? Al contrario...

—No, no, no me refería a eso —dijo Nikolái Andréyevich—. Quería hablarte de lo importante que es, en medio de las contradicciones, de la niebla, del polvo, no estar ciegos, ver la inmensidad de nuestro camino, porque si te ciegas puedes

volverte loco.

Iván Grigórievich respondió con aire de culpabilidad:

—Sí, ya ves, ésa es mi desgracia; está claro que soy yo el que confunde la vista con la ceguera.

—¿Dónde ponemos a Vania? —preguntó María Pávlovna—. ¿Dónde estará más cómodo?

Iván Grigórievich respondió:

—No, no, gracias, no puedo quedarme a dormir con vosotros.

—¿Por qué no? ¿Adonde irás, entonces? ¡Masha, ven que lo atamos! —bromeó Nikolái Andréyevich.

—No hace falta que me atéis —replicó Iván Grigórievich.

Nikolái Andréyevich se calló y frunció el ceño.

—Perdonadme, no pasa nada, simplemente no puedo, no puedo... Es otra cosa... —dijo Iván Grigórievich.

—¿Sabes qué, Vania...? —empezó a decir Nikolái Andréyevich, pero de repente se calló.

Una vez se hubo marchado Iván Grigórievich, María Pávlovna miró la mesa, llena de entremeses y con las sillas apartadas.

—Lo hemos recibido como a un rey —dijo ella— Ni a los Nesmeyánov les brindamos mejor bienvenida.

En efecto, María Pávlovna —algo insólito en una persona avara— había preparado una opulenta comida, que superaba en largueza a las naturalezas más generosas.

Nikolái Andréyevich se acercó a la mesa.

—Sí, cuando un hombre está loco, lo está para toda la vida —dijo.

Posó las manos sobre las sienes de su marido y, besándole en la frente, le dijo:

—No te aflijas; no debes, mi idealista incorregible.

5

IVÁN Grigorievich se despertó al amanecer, acostado sobre la cama de uno de esos vagones sin asientos reservados, y aguzó el oído al ruido de las ruedas; después, con los ojos entreabiertos, escudriñó la penumbra que precede a la mañana y que se demoraba detrás de la ventana...

Muchas veces, durante sus veintinueve años de reclusión, su infancia se le había aparecido en sueños. Una vez había soñado con una pequeña cala: en las aguas quietas, sobre el fondo recubierto de piedrecitas, se deslizaban de lado, con su silencioso movimiento submarino, algunos cangrejos que se escondían entre las algas... Él caminaba despacio sobre los cantos rodados, sintiendo bajo las plantas de los pies la suavidad del musgo subacuático mientras, a modo de chorritos de mercurio, decenas de minúsculas gotas alargadas saltaban y se desparramaban alrededor: eran caballas y jureles... El sol iluminaba los verdes prados submarinos, diminutos abetales: se diría que la encantadora cala no estaba llena de agua salada sino de luz...

Había tenido ese sueño en el vagón de mercancías del convoy de prisioneros y, aunque desde entonces había transcurrido un cuarto de siglo, no había olvidado la desesperación que se había apoderado de él al ver la gris luz invernal y las caras grises de los detenidos, al oír fuera del vagón el crujido de las botas sobre la nieve, el retumbante golpeteo de los martillos de los vigilantes comprobando la carrocería del vagón.

A veces le venía a la mente la casa frente al mar, las ramas del viejo cerezo que se inclinaban sobre el techo, el pozo...

Forzando la memoria hasta el tormento, evocaba el brillo y el espesor de una hoja de magnolia, una piedra plana en medio del riachuelo... Recordaba la calma y el frescor de las habitaciones blanqueadas con yeso, el dibujo del mantel. Se acordaba de cuando leía con las piernas tendidas sobre el sofá: el hule con el que estaba recubierto le confería un agradable frescor en los calurosos días de verano. A veces intentaba recordar el rostro de la madre: la tristeza invadía su corazón, apretaba los párpados, y de los ojos cerrados brotaban lágrimas, como cuando de niño se intenta mirar el sol.

Recordaba con facilidad las montañas, con todo detalle, como si hojeara un libro conocido que se abre por la página deseada. Abriéndose paso entre los arbustos de moras y las ramas curvadas de los olmos, deslizándose por una

pedregosa tierra agrietada de color amarillo—azufre, alcanzaba el paso entre las montañas y, después de volver la vista atrás, hacia el mar, penetraba en la fresca penumbra del bosque... Sobre sus ramas gruesas las encinas poderosas se erguían hacia el cielo, con ligereza, colinas de follaje esculpido; un silencio húmedo reinaba alrededor.

A mediados del siglo pasado, la costa estaba poblada por los circasianos.

Un viejecito griego, padre del horticultor Meto— dio, había visto de niño las populosas aldeas circasianas, los jardines.

Después de la conquista de la costa por parte de los rusos, los circasianos se marcharon y la vida en las montañas costeras se extinguió. Aquí y allá, entre las encinas, habían crecido —salvajes y encorvados— ciruelos, perales y cerezos. Pero ya no había melocotoneros ni albaricoques: su breve existencia había terminado.

Esparcidas por el bosque se hallaban sombrías piedras tiznadas por el humo, vestigios de hogares destruidos; en los cementerios abandonados, semi-hundidos en la tierra, se ennegrecían las lápidas sepulcrales.

Todo lo que era inanimado, las piedras, el hierro, acababa, con los años, siendo absorbido por la tierra, se disolvía en ella, mientras que la vida verde, por el contrario, brotaba de la tierra. El silencio que planeaba sobre los hogares apagados angustiaba al niño. De vuelta a casa, el olor del humo de la cocina, el ladrido de los perros, el cloqueo de las gallinas le resultaban particularmente agradables.

Una vez se había acercado a su madre, sentada al lado de la mesa con un libro, y la había abrazado, apretando la cabeza contra sus rodillas.

—¿Te encuentras mal? —le preguntó ella.

—No, estoy bien, estoy tan contento —musitó besando el vestido de su madre, sus manos, y se echó a llorar.No había logrado explicarle a su madre lo que sentía: era como si en la oscuridad del bosque alguien se lamentara, buscara a la gente que se había ido, mirara detrás de los árboles, tratando de escuchar las voces de los pastores circasianos, el llanto de los niños, levantando la nariz para comprobar si olía a humo, a galletas calientes...

Por esa razón no sólo experimentaba alegría sino también vergüenza al sentir, volviendo del bosque, el encanto de la casa familiar...

Le pareció que su madre no había entendido nada de sus explicaciones porque exclamó:

—Tontito mío, qué difícil te resultará vivir con un corazón tan sensible, tan vulnerable.

Durante la cena el padre intercambió una mirada con la madre y dijo:

—Vania, seguramente sabes que en otro tiempo nuestro Sochi se llamaba Puesto Dajovski y los poblados entre las montañas, «primera compañía», «segunda compañía»...

—Sí —respondió él, y resopló con fastidio.

—Eran estacionamientos del ejército ruso; cuando iban allí no sólo llevaban fusiles sino también hachas y palas para abrirse camino a través de la maleza, donde vivían montañeses salvajes y crueles. —El padre se rascó la barba y añadió—: Perdona si hablo con grandilocuencia: abrían el camino para Rusia, y así fue como nos establecimos aquí... Yo, por ejemplo, contribuí a crear escuelas. Por ejemplo, Yákov Yákovlevich plantó viñedos, huertos. Otros construyeron hospitales, trazaron carreteras. El progreso exige víctimas, no hay que llorar por lo que es inevitable. ¿Entiendes lo que te quiero decir?

—Sí —contestó Vania—, pero los huertos estaban aquí antes que nosotros; ahora han vuelto a su estado salvaje.

—Sí, sí, amigo mío —dijo el padre—. Cuando se corta el bosque, las astillas vuelan. Y, por otra parte, a los circasianos no los expulsaron de aquí, fueron ellos los que se marcharon a Turquía. Habrían podido quedarse y familiarizarse con la cultura rusa. En Turquía vivían en la indigencia y muchos de ellos murieron...

El pasado le volvía a la memoria: veía en sueños la tierra natal, oía voces conocidas, y el perro de corral, con los ojos rojos y lacrimosos por la vejez, se levantaba para darle la bienvenida.

Y se despertaba con el rumor del océano de la taiga sobre el que arreciaba una nevasca invernal.

Y ahora sus días de vida en libertad habían llegado y seguía esperando el regreso de algo joven y bueno.

Aquella mañana, en el tren, se había despertado con una sensación de irremediable soledad. El encuentro del día antes con su primo le había llenado de amargura y Moscú le había ensordecido, le había aplastado. La mole de los altísimos edificios, el flujo de los coches, los semáforos, la muchedumbre que caminaba por las aceras, todo aquello era extraño, ajeno. La ciudad le había parecido un enorme mecanismo amaestrado que, ahora se quedaba inmóvil por la señal roja, ahora se ponía en marcha de nuevo con la luz verde... Rusia había visto muchas cosas en mil años de historia. Durante los años soviéticos el país había sido testigo de victorias militares mundiales, enormes construcciones, ciudades nuevas, presas que detenían el curso del Dniéper y el Volga y canales que unían los mares,

la potencia de los tractores, de los rascacielos... La única cosa que Rusia no había visto en mil años era la libertad.

Tomó un trolebús para ir al sudoeste de Moscú. Allí, en el barro del campo y entre los estanques que aún no se habían secado, despuntaban enormes edificios de ocho y diez pisos. Las isbas campesinas, los huertecitos, los pequeños depósitos estaban viviendo sus últimos días, oprimidos por la arrolladora ofensiva de la piedra y el asfalto.

En el caos, en medio del rugido de los camiones de cinco toneladas, se adivinaban las futuras calles del nuevo Moscú. Iván Grigórievich vagó por la ciudad naciente, donde todavía no había calzadas ni aceras, donde la gente llegaba a las casas por senderos, sorteando montones de basura. Por todas partes, sobre las casas, colgaban los mismos letreros: «Carne» y «Peluquería». En el crepúsculo, los letreros verticales con su inscripción de «Carne» brillaban con luz roja, mientras que los letreros de «Peluquería» resplandecían con un verde intenso.

Aquellos letreros, que habían surgido con la llegada de los primeros habitantes, parecían revelar la naturaleza carnívora del hombre.

Carne, carne, carne... Los seres humanos devoran carne. Sin carne, el hombre no puede vivir. Allí no había bibliotecas, teatros, cines, sastrerías, ni siquiera había hospitales, farmacias, escuelas; pero enseguida, de repente, entre las piedras, resplandecía un fuego rojo: carne, carne, carne...

Y justo después, el color esmeralda de los letreros de las peluquerías. El hombre comía carne y se cubría con pelo.

Llegó a la estación cuando ya era de noche; se enteró de que a las dos salía el último tren para Leningrado, compró el billete y retiró su equipaje de la consigna.

Se asombró de la sensación de paz que halló al encontrarse en un vagón vacío, frío.

El tren atravesó los suburbios de Moscú; detrás de la ventana pasaban rápidamente los oscuros bosques y los claros otoñales, e Iván Grigórievich sintió alivio porque se escapaba de aquella mole de electricidad, de edificios y de automóviles que era Moscú, y no escucharía las palabras de su primo sobre el curso razonable de la historia, que le había hecho un lugar a él, Nikoláí Andréyevich.

Sobre el banco pulido se reflejó, como en el agua, el brillo de la luz de la linterna de la revisora.

—Abuelo, ¿tiene billete?

—Sí, ya se lo he enseñado.

Durante años había pensado en el momento en que, una vez en libertad, se encontraría con su primo, la única persona en el mundo que conocía su infancia, a su madre y a su padre.

Por la mañana se despertó con una sensación de soledad tan completa que le pareció imposible que ningún ser humano pudiera soportarla.

Se dirigía a la ciudad donde habían transcurrido sus años de estudiante, donde vivía su amor.

Cuando muchos años antes ella había dejado de escribirle, él la lloró, convencido de que sólo la muerte habría podido interrumpir su correspondencia. Pero estaba viva, estaba viva...

6

IVÁN Grigorievich pasó tres días en Leningrado. Se acercó dos veces a la universidad y fue a Ojta, al instituto politécnico. Buscaba las calles y las casas donde vivían sus conocidos, pero no las encontraba porque habían sido destruidas durante el sitio de Leningrado.

Y a veces, cuando sí lograba dar con una calle o una casa, no encontraba ningún apellido conocido en los tablones negros con los nombres de los inquilinos que colgaban de las puertas.

Andando por aquellos lugares familiares, a veces estaba tranquilo y distraído: se sentía rodeado de sus compañeros de la cárcel, de las conversaciones de los campos; otras, sin embargo, asaltado por recuerdos de juventud, se paraba frente a una casa conocida, se demoraba en un cruce que había reconocido. Fue al Museo del Hermitage y lo abandonó lleno de aburrimiento y de frío. ¿Era posible que los cuadros hubieran seguido siendo tan bellos durante todos aquellos años, mientras él se transformaba en un viejo presidiario? ¿Por qué no habían cambiado, por qué no habían envejecido los rostros de las divinas madonnas y el llanto no había cegado sus ojos? ¿Era posible que de aquella eternidad, de aquella inmutabilidad, no derivara su fuerza sino su debilidad? ¿Era así como el arte traicionaba al hombre que lo había creado?En una ocasión, un recuerdo fortuito e insignificante irrumpió en su mente con una fuerza particular: había ayudado a una mujer vieja y coja a subir una cesta al tercer piso, después bajó corriendo la escalera oscura y al emerger de la penumbra a la luz del día, de repente lanzó un grito de felicidad: era primavera, el sol de marzo, los charcos...

Se acercó hasta la casa donde vivía Ania Zamkovskaya y le pareció increíble volver a ver las ventanas altas, el revestimiento de granito de las paredes, el mármol de los peldaños que blanqueaba en la oscuridad, la red metálica alrededor del ascensor... ¡Cuántas veces se había acordado de aquella casa! Acompañaba a Ania después de sus paseos nocturnos y se quedaba allí parado, debajo de su ventana, hasta que se encendía la luz. Ella le decía: «Aunque volvieses de la guerra ciego o mutilado, sería feliz por tu amor».

Iván Grigórievich vio flores en la ventana entreabierta. Permaneció un rato al lado de la puerta, después siguió su camino. No le dio un vuelco el corazón: allá, cuando estaba detrás de la alambrada, esa mujer que creía muerta estaba más cerca de su alma que hoy, cuando se había detenido bajo su ventana.

Reconocía y no reconocía la ciudad; le parecía que muchas cosas apenas habían cambiado, como si Iván Grigórievich hubiera pasado por aquellas calles sólo unas horas antes. Pero también había muchas casas y calles nuevas. Y en el lugar de lo que había desaparecido, no había aparecido nada nuevo.

Iván Grigórievich no comprendía que no sólo la ciudad había cambiado, también había cambiado él.

Iván Grigorievich —sus intereses, su mirada escrutadora— se había convertido en otro.

Ahora veía en aquella ciudad lo que antes no había visto, como si su vida se hubiera mudado de un piso a otro. Sus ojos descubrían mercados callejeros, comisarías de policía, oficinas de pasaporte, tabernas, agencias de empleo, tablones con ofertas de trabajo, hospitales, salas para viajeros en tránsito... Y el mundo que él había conocido —el de las carteleras teatrales, salas de conciertos, librerías de viejo, estadios, anfiteatros universitarios, salas de lectura y de exposiciones— había desaparecido en la cuarta dimensión.

Para un enfermo crónico, en la ciudad sólo existen las farmacias y los hospitales, los ambulatorios y las comisiones de peritaje médico. Para un borracho, la ciudad está hecha de medios litros de vodka para compartir entre tres. Y para un enamorado, la ciudad se compone de las agujas de los relojes de la calle que marcan la hora de las citas, de los bancos en las avenidas, de las monedas de dos kopeks para el teléfono público.

En aquellas calles hubo un tiempo en que había gente conocida por doquier; ventanas de amigos que se iluminaban por las noches. Ahora, en cambio, desde los catres de los campos le sonreían ojos conocidos, y pálidos labios le susurraban:

—Iván Grigorievich, ¡saludos!

Allí, en aquella ciudad, hubo un tiempo en que conocía de vista a los vendedores de libros y a los dependientes de las tiendas de comestibles, a los mozos de los quioscos, a las vendedoras de cigarrillos.En Vorkutá una vez se le había acercado un vigilante del campo y le había dicho:

—Yo te conozco, estabas en la prisión de tránsito de Omsk.

Hoy, entre el gentío de miles de personas de Leningrado, no había visto ni una cara conocida y sentía que no tenía nada en común con todos aquellos desconocidos. En la vasta tipología de caras se había producido un gran cambio.

Las relaciones, visibles e invisibles, habían desaparecido, se habían hecho jirones; las había desgarrado el tiempo, las deportaciones masivas tras el asesinato de Kírov, las habían sepultado las tormentas, la nieve y el polvo de Kazajstán, las

hambrunas durante el sitio de Leningrado: ya no existían. Caminaba solo, era un extraño...

El movimiento en masa de millones de personas había hecho que las calles de Leningrado se atestaran de gente de provincias, de ojos claros y pómulos prominentes, mientras que en los barracones del campo Iván Grigórievich a menudo se había encontrado con tristes petersburgueses cuyo origen aristocrático se adivinaba por su modo de pronunciar la erre.

La avenida Nevski y la ordinariez de las cabañas del campo habían ido una al encuentro de la otra, mezclándose no sólo en los autobuses y en los apartamentos, sino también en las páginas de los libros y las revistas, en las salas de conferencias de los institutos científicos.

Iván Grigórievich había percibido el espíritu cuartelado de los campos fuera del campo: mirando por las ventanas de las comisarías de Leningrado, sentado a la opulenta mesa escuchando los discursos de su primo, observando el letrero de la oficina de pasaportes. Le parecía que las alambradas ni siquiera eran necesarias y que, fuera o dentro de ellas, la vida, en esencia, era la misma.

La enorme caldera, envuelta en humo y llamas, bullía, gorgoteaba, gemía caóticamente, y muchos pensaban, cada uno por su cuenta, que eran los únicos que entendían la ley de ebullición de aquella enorme caldera, los únicos que sabían cómo se cocinaban las gachas y quién iba a comérselas.

Iván Grigórievich se encontró de nuevo, con sus botas de soldado, ante el jinete descalzo como un dios con su corona de laurel. Treinta años antes, cuando era joven, había pasado por allí, y el broncíneo Pedro estaba lleno de vigor. Finalmente Iván Grigórievich se había encontrado con un conocido.

Le pareció que no hacía treinta años ni ciento treinta desde que Pushkin había llevado al héroe de su poema a aquella plaza; el divino Pedro nunca había sido tan grande como hoy. No había en el mundo una fuerza más poderosa que la que él había captado y expresado: la fuerza majestuosa de un Estado excelso. Ésta crecía, se levantaba, reinaba sobre los campos, sobre las fábricas, sobre los escritorios de los poetas y los científicos, sobre las construcciones de los canales y las presas, sobre las canteras, los aserraderos y los astilleros, capaz, en su potencia, de apoderarse también de la vastedad de los espacios y de las arcanas profundidades del corazón del hombre que, fascinado, le entrega el don de la libertad, el deseo mismo de libertad.

—Sankt—Petersburg, sanpropusnik[12] —se repetía Iván Grigorievich.

Aquellas palabras se habían cruzado absurdamente entre sí, expresando la relación entre el gran jinete y el hombre andrajoso salido del campo.

Iván Grigorievich pernoctó en la estación, en la sala para los pasajeros en tránsito. Durante el día no había gastado más de un rublo y medio o dos, y no tenía prisa en dejar Leningrado.

El tercer día se encontró con un buen conocido del que se había acordado a menudo cuando estaba en los campos.

Se reconocieron enseguida, si bien el Iván Grigorievich actual no se parecía en nada al estudiante universitario de tercer curso, y el Vitali Antónovich Pineguin que se había encontrado, con impermeable gris y sombrero de fieltro, no se parecía al joven que en otro tiempo llevaba una chaqueta de estudiante gastada.

Al percibir el estupor en la cara de Pineguin, Iván Grigorievich dijo:

—Veo que ya me dabas por muerto.

Pineguin se quedó desconcertado.

—Hace unos diez años se decía que...

Con sus ojos vivos y penetrantes, escrutaba la mirada de Iván Grigorievich.

—No te preocupes —dijo Iván Grigorievich—, no he vuelto del otro mundo ni soy un fugitivo, lo que sería aún peor. Tengo pasaporte y todo lo demás, igual que tú.

Esas palabras indignaron a Pineguin.

—Cuando me encuentro con un viejo amigo, no me intereso por su pasaporte.

Había llegado muy alto pero, en el fondo, continuaba siendo un buen tipo.

Hablase de lo que hablase —de sus hijos, de «lo mucho que has cambiado, pero igualmente te he reconocido al instante»—, sus ojos seguían a Iván Grigorievich, ávidos y fascinados.

—Bueno, eso es todo, en pocas palabras... —dijo Pineguin—. ¿Y tú, qué me cuentas?

Iván Grigorievich pensó para sus adentros: «Sería mejor que tú me contaras algo más...».

Por un instante Pineguin se quedó helado, casi como si le hubiese leído el pensamiento.

—No sé nada de ti —dijo Pineguin.

Y de nuevo la espera, como si Iván Grigorievich fuera a responderle: «Bien que hablaste de mí cuando lo creíste oportuno. ¿Qué quieres que te cuente,

ahora?».

Pero Iván Grigorievich guardó silencio e hizo un gesto de indiferencia con la mano.

Y de repente Pineguin lo comprendió: Vánechka, el pobre diablo, no sabía nada y no podía saber nada. Los nervios, los nervios... ¿Por qué diantres había escogido aquel día para llevar el coche al mecánico? Hacía poco que se había acordado de Iván y se había preguntado qué pasaría si un día alguien de su familia intentaba que le rehabilitaran póstumamente: ¡lo pasarían de la categoría de almas muertas a la de almas vivas! Y de repente, a plena luz de día, ahí estaba Iván, Vánechka. Había purgado treinta años y seguramente ahora tendría en el bolsillo un trozo de papel, que diría: «Absuelto por falta de pruebas».

Miró a los ojos de Iván Grigórievich de nuevo y acabó convenciéndose por completo de que no sabía nada. Se avergonzó de los latidos violentos de su corazón, del sudor frío; por poco no se había puesto allí mismo a lloriquear, a lamentarse.

Y la certeza de que Iván no le escupiría en la cara ni le pediría explicaciones por su comportamiento iluminó a Pineguin. Y con una especie de gratitud que a él mismo le resultaba confusa, dijo:

—Escucha, Iván, te hablaré sin rodeos, como los obreros, ya sabes que mi padre era herrero: ¿necesitas dinero? Créeme, te lo digo de corazón, como un amigo...

Sin reproche, con una curiosidad viva y triste, Iván Grigórievich miró a los ojos de Pineguin, y a Pineguin le pareció por un segundo —sólo por un segundo o tal vez dos— que le habría dado las condecoraciones, la dacha, la autoridad, el poder, su hermosa mujer y sus prometedores hijos que estudiaban física nuclear, todo, se lo habría dado todo para no sentir el peso de su mirada.

—Bueno, que te vaya bien, Pineguin —dijo Iván Grigórievich.

Y se dirigió a la estación.

7

QUIÉN es culpable, quién responderá por ello...

Hay que reflexionar, no hay que darse prisa en contestar.

Ahí están los falsos peritajes de ingenieros y literatos, los discursos que desenmascaran a los enemigos del pueblo, ahí están las conversaciones con el corazón en la mano, las confesiones entre amigos que acabaron transformándose en denuncias e informes de chivatos, informadores, colaboradores secretos.

Las denuncias precedían a la orden de arresto, acompañaban la instrucción, influían sobre las condenas. Aquellas megatoneladas de denuncias falsas determinaban, al parecer, los nombres de las listas de kulaks que era preciso expropiar, de las personas a las que se privaba del derecho al voto, de pasaporte, que había que deportar, fusilar.

En un extremo de la cadena dos hombres conversaban sentados a una mesa mientras daban sorbitos de té; más tarde, a la luz de una lámpara tamizada por una acogedora pantalla, se escribía una confesión bien redactada; o bien en la asamblea de un koljós un activista pronunciaba un discurso sin formalidades, y al otro lado de la cadena había ojos dementes, riñones magullados, cráneos atravesados de un balazo, cadáveres de muertos por escorbuto amontonados en la morgue de un campo, dedos de pies congelados en la taiga, purulentos y gangrenados.

En el principio fue la palabra... Así fue, de verdad.

¿Cómo hay que tratar a los delatores asesinos?

Helo aquí, ha vuelto después de pasar veinte años confinado en un campo, un hombre con las manos temblorosas y los ojos hundidos de un mártir: el Judas número uno. Y entre sus amigos corre un rumor: dicen que en su tiempo, durante los interrogatorios, se había comportado mal. Algunos le han retirado el saludo. Los más razonables son educados con él cuando se lo encuentran, pero no lo invitan a sus casas. Los más inteligentes, anchos de miras y profundos siguen invitándolo a sus casas, pero no le dejan entrar en sus almas, que permanecen cerradas frente a él.

Todos ellos tienen dachas, cartillas de ahorro, condecoraciones, coches. Por

supuesto, él está delgado mientras que ellos están gordos; pero ellos, en efecto, no se comportaron mal durante los interrogatorios. A decir verdad, no tuvieron siquiera la oportunidad de comportarse vilmente durante los interrogatorios, ya que no les interrogaron. Tuvieron suerte: no los arrestaron. ¿En qué radica, pues, la verdadera superioridad espiritual de aquellos gordos sobre este delgado? De hecho, él podría ser gordo, y ellos podrían ser delgados. ¿Fue la casualidad o una ley lo que determinó sus destinos?

Él era un hombre normal y corriente. Bebía té, comía tortilla, le gustaba conversar con los amigos de los libros que había leído, iba al Teatro del Arte, mostraba a veces bondad. Hay que decir que era muy impresionable, nervioso, inseguro.

Pero aquel hombre había sido sometido a una fuerte presión. No sólo le gritaron, le pegaron, no le dejaron dormir, no le dieron de beber y le hicieron comer arenques salados, también lo aterrorizaron amenazándole con la pena de muerte. Pero, se diga lo que se diga, había hecho una cosa terrible: había calumniado a un inocente. A decir verdad, aquél, el calumniado, no fue encarcelado, mientras que él, que fue obligado a calumniar, cumplió doce años de trabajos forzados en un campo del que volvió más muerto que vivo, roto, indigente: una piltrafa. Pero ¡había calumniado!

No nos precipitemos, reflexionemos seriamente sobre este delator.

Y he aquí el Judas número dos. Éste no pasó ni un día siquiera en prisión. Se le consideraba inteligente, un verdadero pico de oro, y mira por dónde, gente que había vuelto de los campos con apenas un hilo de vida contaba que era un delator. Contribuyó a arruinar la vida de muchas personas. Durante años mantuvo conversaciones confidenciales con sus amigos para después plasmarlas por escrito y entregarlas a las autoridades. Sus confesiones no se obtenían con torturas: aguzaba el ingenio y era él mismo el que llevaba hábilmente a sus interlocutores a hablar de temas peligrosos. Dos de los calumniados no volvieron de los campos, uno fue fusilado conforme a la sentencia del Tribunal Militar. Aquellos que volvieron habían contraído una larga lista de enfermedades por las cuales la severa Comisión de peritaje médico les concedió la invalidez de primer grado.

Él, durante aquel tiempo, había echado barriga y se había forjado fama de ser un fino gourmet, un buen conocedor de los vinos georgianos. Y trabajaba en el campo de las bellas artes; entre otras cosas coleccionaba ediciones únicas de poesía antigua.

Pero tampoco en este caso nos precipitaremos, reflexionaremos antes de

emitir una sentencia.

Y es que desde niño había vivido aterrorizado: su padre, un hombre rico, había muerto de tifus en 1919, en un campo de concentración; su tía había emigrado a París con su marido, que era general; su hermano mayor había combatido como voluntario en el Ejército Blanco. Desde niño había vivido con miedo. La madre temblaba de miedo ante la milicia, el administrador de la casa, el responsable del piso comunitario, los empleados del soviet municipal. Cada día, a cada hora, él y los suyos sentían que el hecho de pertenecer a su clase social era una limitación, una tara. En la escuela se estremecía ante el secretario de la célula del Partido y le parecía que Galia, la atractiva cabecilla de los pioneros, le miraba con repugnancia, como a un gusano intocable. Le atemorizaba la idea de que ella pudiese notar su mirada enamorada.

Ahora se empieza a comprender algo. Estaba fascinado por la fuerza del nuevo mundo: como un pajarillo clavaba sus ojitos amables y brillantes en el nuevo mundo. Deseaba tanto comulgar, ser juzgado digno. Y he aquí que el nuevo mundo lo inició. El pequeño gorrión no pió, sus alas no se estremecieron cuando el amenazador nuevo mundo requirió su mente y aquel encanto inherente a él. Todo él se ofreció en el altar de la patria.

Todo eso era verdad, por supuesto. Pero qué canalla, qué vil se había mostrado. Mientras denunciaba a otros, no se olvidaba de sí mismo: comía manjares deliciosos, se cuidaba con mimo. Y sin embargo seguía sintiéndose indefenso; un tipo así necesita niñera, una mujercita. ¿Cómo habría podido dominar aquella fuerza que había doblegado a medio mundo, que había vuelto del revés a todo un imperio? Con su trémula delicadeza era como un encaje; bastaba con rozarlo un poco para que se sintiera confuso y a sus ojos asomara una expresión lastimosa.

Y helo ahí, esa mortífera víbora de pantano se aproximaba con maniobras sinuosas y provocaba grandes tormentos a la gente.

Buscaba la perdición de gente como él, viejos amigos, amables, discretos, inteligentes, tímidos. Sólo él tenía la llave que abría sus corazones. Porque él lo entendía todo: lloraba leyendo El arzobispo de Chéjov.

Y aun así, esperemos todavía, no dictaremos ninguna sentencia sin reflexionar.

Y aquí está un nuevo compañero: el tercer Judas. Tiene la voz entrecortada, ronca, una voz de contramaestre. Una mirada tranquila, escrutadora. Tiene la seguridad del que es dueño de su vida. Ahora le confían un trabajo ideológico,

ahora le emplean en una tienda de frutas y legumbres. Los datos de su cuestionario biográfico son de una blancura nívea, resplandecen en su aureola. Sus parientes: obreros de fábrica y una paupérrima ascendencia campesina.

En 1937 ese hombre escribió del tirón más de doscientas denuncias. Su sangrienta lista era muy variada. Comisarios de la época de la guerra civil, un poeta cantante, el director de una fábrica de fundición de hierro, dos secretarios del Comité del distrito del Partido, tres directores, uno de un periódico y dos de editoriales, el gerente de una cantina cerrada al público, un profesor de filosofía, el responsable de una sala de lectura del Partido, un profesor de botánica, el cerrajero de la administración de una casa, dos colaboradores de la sección agrícola regional... Imposible enumerarlos a todos.

Todas sus denuncias iban dirigidas contra gente soviética y no contra la gente antigua[13]; sus víctimas eran miembros del Partido, combatientes de la guerra civil, activistas. Se había especializado en particular en los miembros del Partido más fanáticos: les cortaba bruscamente los ojos con una cuchilla de afeitar mortal.

De aquellos doscientos, volvieron pocos: a unos los fusilaron, a otros les enfundaron en un abrigo de madera, murieron de distrofia, fueron ejecutados durante las purgas efectuadas en los campos; los que volvieron, mutilados física y espiritualmente, arrastraban como podían sus vidas en libertad.

Para él, el año 1937 fue un tiempo de victorias. Él, un joven poco instruido y de ojos vivos, tenía la impresión de que todos a su alrededor eran más fuertes, ya fuera por su formación o por un pasado heroico. No le correspondía recibir nada de aquellos que habían emprendido y llevado a cabo la Revolución. Pero con qué fantástica facilidad, después de un único encuentro con él, sucumbían decenas de hombres cubiertos de gloria revolucionaria.

Desde 1937 tuvo un ascenso vertiginoso. En él se había manifestado la gracia, la esencia más preciosa del nuevo mundo.

Parece que en este caso todo está claro: fue pisando cadáveres y provocando suplicios terribles al tiempo que se convertía en diputado y en miembro del Politburó.

Pero no, no nos apresuremos, tenemos que entender, reflexionar antes de dictar una sentencia. Porque él no sabía lo que hacía.

Los viejos mentores una vez le habían dicho, hablando en nombre del Partido: «¡Qué desgracia! ¡Estamos rodeados de enemigos! Se hacen pasar por fieles miembros del Partido, ex militantes clandestinos, combatientes de la guerra civil, cuando en realidad son enemigos del pueblo, colaboradores de los servicios de inteligencia extranjeros, provocateurs...». El Partido le decía: «Eres joven y puro,

yo creo en ti, muchacho, ayúdame o estoy acabado, ayúdame a vencer a la escoria...».

El Partido le gritaba, le pisoteaba con las botas de Stalin: «¡Si muestras indecisión, estarás en la misma categoría que esos degenerados y te reduciré a polvo! Acuérdate, hijo de perra, de la oscura isba donde naciste; soy yo el que te ha llevado a la luz: respeta el voto de obediencia, el gran Stalin, tu padre, te lo ordena: ¡a por ellos!».

No, no se trataba de ajustar cuentas personales... Él, komsomol campesino, no creía en Dios. Tenía otra fe: la fe en la implacable mano castigadora del gran Stalin. En él habitaba la obediencia ciega del creyente. En él habitaba una timidez agradecida frente a aquella fuerza grandiosa, frente a los geniales líderes: Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin. El, soldadito del gran Stalin, cumplía fielmente su voluntad.

Pero por supuesto, en él también habitaba una hostilidad biológica, una repugnancia instintiva hacia los hombres de la generación intelectual, fanática, revolucionaria a los que tenía que perseguir.

Cumplía con su deber, no ajustaba cuentas, escribía denuncias por instinto de conservación. Ganaba un capital más valioso que el oro y las tierras: la confianza del Partido. Sabía que en la vida soviética la confianza del Partido lo era todo: la fuerza, el honor, el poder. Y creía que su mentira servía a una verdad superior; a través de la denuncia veía incluso la verdad suprema.

Pero ¿se le puede echar la culpa cuando otras cabezas diferentes a la suya no lograban discernir dónde estaba la verdad y dónde la mentira, cuando también los limpios de corazón se quedaban perplejos e impotentes sin saber determinar qué era el bien y qué el mal?

Él creía o, para ser más exactos, quería creer; o más exactamente todavía; no podía no creer.

En cierto sentido, esa ocupación sombría le resultaba desagradable pero era su deber. Y además le gustaba alguna otra cosa de esa actividad abominable, le embriagaba, le atraía. «Recuerda —le decían sus mentores—, no tienes ni padre ni madre ni hermanos ni hermanas; sólo tienes el Partido.»

Y una sensación extraña y penosa se reforzaba en él: en su fe irreflexiva, en su obediencia, no hallaba debilidad sino una fuerza temible.

En sus ojos malvados de general, en su imperiosa voz entrecortada, se revelaba la sombra de una naturaleza completamente diferente que en secreto vivía en él, una naturaleza estupefacta, atontada, alimentada y abrevada durante siglos de esclavitud rusa, de despotismo asiático...

Sí, sí, en este punto también hay que pararse a reflexionar. Qué terrible es condenar también a un hombre terrible.

Y he aquí un nuevo camarada: el Judas número cuatro.

Vive en un apartamento comunal, es un pequeño empleado, el activista de un koljós. Pero sea quien sea, su rostro es siempre el mismo: bien sea joven o viejo, feo o de buena planta y mejillas sonrosadas como un bogatir[14]; se le reconoce enseguida. Es un pequeñoburgués ávido de poseer cosas, interesado fanáticamente en acumular bienes materiales. Su fanatismo por obtener un sofá cama, un puñado de trigo sarraceno, un mueble aparador polaco, materiales de construcción escasos, manufacturas de importación era comparable, por su intensidad, a la de Giordano Bruno y Andréi Zheliábov.

Es el creador de un imperativo categórico opuesto al kantiano: el hombre y la humanidad siempre representan para él un medio en su caza de objetos. Tienen sus ojos, ya sean claros u oscuros, una expresión siempre tensa, ofendida e irritada. Siempre hay alguien que le ha pisado, e invariablemente tiene que ajustar cuentas con alguien.

La pasión del Estado por desenmascarar a enemigos del pueblo para él es una bendición. Es como el fuerte viento alisio que sopla sobre el océano. Ese viento propicio infla su pequeña vela amarilla. Y a costa de los sufrimientos de aquellos a los que busca la ruina, obtiene lo que necesita: una superficie habitable extra, un aumento de sueldo, la isba del vecino, muebles polacos, un garaje para proteger contra el frío su Moskvich, un pequeño jardín...

Desprecia los libros, la música, la belleza de la naturaleza, el amor, la ternura de una madre. Sólo le interesan los objetos, única y exclusivamente los objetos.

Pero no siempre le guían las razones meramente materiales. Es susceptible, le consumen las ofensas del alma.

Escribe una denuncia contra uno de sus colegas que ha suscitado sus celos al bailar con su mujer; contra un tipo chistoso que en una cena le ha tomado el pelo; e incluso contra un vecino que sin querer ha chocado con él en la cocina comunal.

Dos rasgos le distinguen: es un voluntario de la delación, un espontáneo, no le han asustado, no le han obligado, denuncia por propia iniciativa; no hace falta atemorizarlo. En segundo lugar, ve en la denuncia una ganancia segura, una ventaja clara.

Y sin embargo, por el momento, detendremos el puño dispuesto a golpearle.

De hecho, su pasión por los objetos nace de la miseria. Sí, él podría hablar

acerca de una habitación de ocho metros cuadrados donde duermen once personas, donde se oye roncar a un paralítico, mientras al lado gimen y susurran dos recién casados y una vieja bisbisea sus oraciones, y el niño que ha mojado las sábanas se echa a llorar.

Podría hablar acerca del pan del campo, de un marrón verdoso por las hojas trituradas, de la sopa moscovita —la única comida diaria, que se repite tres veces— a base de patatas heladas compradas a precio de saldo.

Podría hablar acerca de una casa donde no hay ni un solo objeto bello, de sillas que en lugar de asientos tienen chapas de madera, de vasos de cristal grueso y turbio, cucharas de estaño y tenedores con dos púas, de la ropa zurcida una y otra vez, del impermeable mugriento de goma bajo el cual se ponían, en diciembre, un chaquetón lleno de rotos.

Podría hablar acerca de cómo esperaba el autobús en la oscuridad de las mañanas invernales, de los inadmisibles apretujones en los tranvías después de la terrible estrechez de la habitación...

¿No sería su vida bestial la que engendró en él aquella pasión bestial por los objetos, por una guarida espaciosa?

Sí, sí, así era. Pero hay que añadir que él no vivía peor que otros; que, incluso viviendo mal, estaba mejor que muchos.

Reflexionemos con calma, la sentencia llegará después.

Acusador: ¿Confirman ustedes que han escrito denuncias contra ciudadanos soviéticos?

Informadores y delatores: Sí, en cierto modo.

Acusador: ¿Se reconocen culpables de la muerte de ciudadanos soviéticos inocentes?

Informadores y delatores: No, lo negamos categóricamente. El Estado había condenado a esa gente de antemano. Nosotros construimos, por así decirlo, la fachada exterior. En realidad, poco importaba lo que nosotros escribiéramos, si los imputábamos o los absolvíamos; aquellas personas estaban ya condenadas por el Estado.

Acusador: Pero ustedes escribían a veces guiándose por su propio criterio. En esos casos, fueron ustedes los que eligieron a las víctimas.

Informadores y delatores: Esa libertad de elección nuestra es sólo aparente. Se aniquilaba a la gente por el método estadístico. Sólo los hombres que

pertenecían a determinadas capas sociales e ideológicas eran condenados al exterminio. Nosotros conocíamos esos parámetros, y ustedes también los conocían. Nosotros nunca delatamos a la gente que pertenecía a la capa sana, que no debía ser destruida.

Acusador: Por decirlo evangélicamente: empuja al que se está cayendo. Sin embargo, hubo casos, incluso en aquellos tiempos feroces, en que el Estado absolvió a las personas que habían sido calumniadas.

Defensor: Sí, en efecto, hubo casos así. Fueron consecuencia de un error. Pero mire, sólo Dios no se equivoca. Y además recordará qué raros eran los casos de absolución y qué pocos los errores.

Acusador: Sí, los informadores y los delatores conocían su trabajo. Pero aun así, respondan, ¿por qué eran espías?

Informadores y delatores (a coro): Me obligaron... Me pegaron... Estaba hipnotizado por el terror, por el poder de la violencia ilimitada... En cuanto a mí, cumplí con mi deber como miembro del Partido, como lo entendía en aquel momento.

Acusador: Y usted, el cuarto camarada, ¿por qué no dice nada?

Judas número cuatro: ¿Por qué me busca? Soy un hombre oscuro. Es más fácil ofenderme a mí que a la gente instruida, con consciencia.

Defensor (interrumpiéndole): Permítame que se lo explique. Mi cliente ha efectuado denuncias, en efecto, persiguiendo beneficios personales. Tenga en cuenta, sin embargo, que en este caso no hay contradicción entre el interés personal y el interés del Estado. El Estado no rechazó las denuncias de mi cliente, por consiguiente él desempeñaba un trabajo útil para el Estado, aunque a primera vista, si se le juzga de una manera superficial, puede parecer que actuaba movido únicamente por impulsos egoístas y personales. Ahora bien, le diré una cosa. En tiempos de Stalin, usted también, acusador, habría sido acusado de subestimar el papel del Estado. ¿No sabe que los campos magnéticos creados por nuestro Estado, su pesada masa de billones de toneladas, el terror y la sumisión extremos que el Estado engendra en los hombres que apenas pesan más que una brizna de hierba son tales que convierten en absurda cualquier acusación dirigida contra una persona débil y desprotegida? Es ridículo acusar a una brizna de haber caído al suelo.

Acusador: Su punto de vista me resulta claro: no está dispuesto a que sus clientes asuman ni la más mínima parte de culpa. Toda recae sobre el Estado. Pero díganme, informadores y delatores, ¿de veras no se reconocen ni un poco culpables?

Informadores y delatores (intercambian miradas, susurran entre sí y después toma la palabra el científico delator): Permita que le responda. Su pregunta, pese a su sencillez aparente, no es en absoluto sencilla. Ante todo, no tiene sentido, pero eso no tiene tanta importancia. De hecho, ¿para qué buscar ahora a los culpables de los delitos cometidos en tiempos de Stalin? Es como si un hombre que hubiera emigrado de la Tierra a la Luna quisiera iniciar una acción judicial a propósito de una parcela de terreno en la Tierra. Por otro lado, si consideramos que las dos épocas no están tan alejadas entre sí y que, como dijo el poeta, en términos de periodos históricos, están prácticamente la una al lado de la otra, surgen no pocas complicaciones. ¿Por qué quieren inculparnos precisamente a nosotros, los más débiles? Empiecen por el Estado, júzguenlo a él. Después de todo, nuestro pecado es el suyo, júzguenle a él, pues. Sin miedo, en voz alta. Ustedes no pueden actuar de otro modo que con valentía porque hablan en nombre de la verdad y de la justicia. Adelante, pues. ¡Actúen! Y luego respondan, por favor, ¿por qué se dan cuenta de todo esto ahora? Nos conocían bien cuando Stalin estaba vivo. Solían encontrarse con nosotros, esperaban su turno a las puertas de nuestros despachos y allí, a veces, con voz de gorrión, susurraban sobre nosotros. Y también nosotros susurrábamos así, con voz de gorrión. Ustedes, como nosotros, fueron copartícipes de la época de Stalin. ¿Por qué ustedes, copartícipes, tienen que juzgarnos a nosotros, copartícipes, y determinar nuestra culpa? ¿Comprende dónde está la complejidad? Tal vez nosotros seamos culpables, pero no hay juez que tenga derecho moral a plantear la cuestión de nuestra culpabilidad. Acuérdese de lo que decía Lev Nikoláyevich': no hay culpables en el mundo. En nuestro Estado existe una fórmula nueva: todos en el mundo son culpables, no existe en el mundo ni un inocente. Se trata únicamente de establecer la medida, el grado de responsabilidad. ¿Le corresponde a usted acusarnos, camarada fiscal? Solo los muertos, aquellos que no sobrevivieron, tienen derecho a juzgarnos. Pero los muertos no hacen preguntas, los muertos guardan silencio. Y ahora, permítame responder con una pregunta a la suya. De hombre a hombre, sin rodeos, con el corazón en la mano, como rusos que somos. ¿Cuál es la causa de esta vil debilidad, de esta blandura común, la suya y la mía?

Acusador: Elude mi pregunta.

(Entra el secretario y le tiende al científico delator un pagúete donde se lee: «Gubernamental».)

Científico delator (tras leer el papel, se lo extiende al acusador): Lea, se lo ruego. Con motivo de mi sesenta aniversario, se reconocen los modestos servicios que he prestado a la ciencia nacional.

Acusador (leyendo el papel): Mal que me pese, no puedo más que alegrarme

junto con usted; a fin de cuentas todos somos soviéticos.

Científico delator: Sí, sí, naturalmente, gracias (masculla entre dientes). Permítame, a través de su periódico, dar las gracias... a las instituciones, las organizaciones, y también a los camaradas y amigos.

Defensor (adopta una pose y pronuncia un alegato): Camarada acusador y miembros del jurado. El camarada fiscal le ha dicho a mi cliente que no ha respondido la pregunta de si reconocía, aunque en parte, ser culpable. Pero usted tampoco ha respondido a su pregunta sobre la causa de nuestra debilidad generalizada, común. ¿Acaso es la naturaleza humana la que engendra delatores, informadores, espías, confidentes? ¿Acaso los engendran las glándulas de secreción interna, la papilla que chapotea en el intestino, el estruendo de los gases gástricos, las mucosas, la actividad de los riñones? ¿O bien nacen del instinto de conservación, de alimentación o de reproducción, de los instintos ciegos y sin olfato?

¿Y acaso no da lo mismo que los delatores sean culpables o no?

Culpables o inocentes, lo repugnante es que existan.

Repugnante es el lado animal, vegetal, mineral, físico—químico del hombre. Es precisamente aquella parte mucosa y peluda del ser humano la que produce confidentes. Los confidentes nacen del hombre. El ardiente vapor del terror estatal ha humedecido al género humano, y los granitos que dormitaban se han inflado, han germinado. El Estado es la tierra. Si en la tierra no se escondiesen los granos, no crecería ni el trigo ni la mala hierba. El hombre no debe más que a sí mismo la abyección humana.

Pero ¿saben qué es lo más repugnante en los confidentes y en los delatores? Lo que hay de malo en ellos, pensaréis.

¡No! Lo más terrible en ellos son sus cosas buenas; lo más triste es que están llenos de cualidades y de virtudes.

Son hijos, padres, maridos amantes, cariñosos... Son gente capaz de hacer el bien, de tener éxito en el trabajo.

Aman la ciencia, la gran literatura rusa, la música hermosa, algunos de ellos expresan con inteligencia y valentía su juicio sobre los más complicados fenómenos de la filosofía moderna, el arte... Y entre ellos se encuentran excelentes, fieles amigos. ¡Qué conmovedor es verlos ir a visitar al compañero que está en el hospital!

Cuántos soldados pacientes e intrépidos hay entre ellos, dispuestos a compartir con el compañero el último trozo de pan seco, el último pellizco de

majorka, dispuesto a sacar en brazos al combatiente que se desangra.

Cuántos poetas, músicos, físicos, médicos de talento hay entre ellos, qué hábiles carpinteros, mecánicos, de esos que el pueblo dice con admiración: tienen las manos de oro.

Eso es precisamente lo terrible: hay muchas, muchas cosas buenas en ellos, en su esencia humana.

¿A quién juzgar? ¡A la naturaleza del hombre! Ella, ella es la que engendra montañas de mentiras, vilezas, cobardías, debilidades. Pero es también ella la que genera cosas bellas, buenas y puras.

Los confidentes y delatores son hombres llenos de virtudes, dejadlos volver a sus casas; pero hasta qué punto son infames, infames pese a todas sus virtudes, pese a la absolución de todos sus pecados... ¿Quién fue el que inventó aquel mal chiste que dice: «Hombre, tu nombre es orgullo»?

Sí, sí. Ellos no son culpables. Fuerzas de plomo, oscuras, los empujaron, millones de toneladas pesaban sobre ellos. No hay inocentes entre los vivos, todos son culpables: tú, el acusado, tú, el fiscal, y yo, que estoy pensando en el acusado, en el fiscal y en el juez.

Pero ¿por qué sufrimos tanto, por qué nos avergonzamos tanto de la depravación humana?

8

«¡EL diablo fue quien me empujó a ir a pie!», se repetía Pineguin. No quería pensar en lo malo y oscuro que durante décadas había dormido en él y que ahora de repente se había despertado. No se trataba de su mala acción, sino de la estúpida casualidad que le había hecho encontrarse con el hombre al que le había buscado la perdición. De no haberse encontrado con él por la calle, lo que dormía en su interior nunca se habría despertado.

Pero se había despertado, y Pineguin, sin darse cuenta, cada vez pensaba menos en la estúpida casualidad y se alarmaba y preocupaba cada vez más. «En definitiva, es un hecho, fui yo, precisamente yo, el que denunció a Vánechka, mientras que habría podido no hacerlo; le rompí la columna vertebral a un hombre, pero... ¡que se vaya al diablo! En otras circunstancias, nos habríamos encontrado y todo estaría en orden... ¡Ay, perro, toda esta basura se ha removido en mi alma! Como si hubiese metido la mano en el bolso de una mujer y ella me hubiese cogido por el brazo, y a mi alrededor estuviesen todos mis ayudantes, secretarios, mi chófer: ay, ay, qué desgracia, mejor sería dejar de vivir después de semejante repugnancia... Tal vez toda mi vida no ha sido más que una cadena de bajezas sin interrupción. Tendría que haber vivido de una manera completamente diferente.»

Y en ese estado de extrema agitación entró Pineguin en el restaurante del Inturist[15] donde le conocían hacía tiempo el maître, los camareros y el portero.

Viéndole a lo lejos, dos empleados del guardarropa salieron corriendo de detrás del mostrador, susurrando: «Por favor, por favor» y, relinchando como potros, se precipitaron impacientemente hacia los ricos pertrechos de Pineguin. Sus ojos eran penetrantes, los ojos bondadosos de unos chicos inteligentes rusos que trabajaban en el guardarropa del restaurante del Inturist, capaces de recordar exactamente quién era cada persona, cómo iba vestida y qué había dicho de improviso. Pero a Pineguin, con su insignia de diputado, le dispensaban un trato cordial y sincero, abierto, casi como si fuera su superior inmediato.

Sin darse prisa, notando bajo los pies la flexible y a la vez elástica suavidad de la alfombra, Pineguin se dirigió al salón del restaurante. Una penumbra solemne reinaba en la espaciosa sala de techo alto. Pineguin respiró despacio el aire tranquilo, fresco y cálido a la vez, y echó una mirada a las mesas cubiertas con manteles almidonados; los jarrones tallados con flores, las copas y los vasitos

emitían un brillo tenue. Caminó hacia el acogedor rincón que conocía bien, bajo el follaje esculpido de un filodendro.

Mientras avanzaba entre las mesitas adornadas con los banderines de un gran número de potencias mundiales, tuvo la impresión de ser un almirante que pasa revista a buques de línea y acorazados.

Y con esa sensación de almirantazgo, sensación que ayuda incontestablemente a vivir, se sentó a la mesita, alargó sin prisa la mano hacia la carta, suntuosa en su encuadernación verde oliva, como el diploma de un laureado, la abrió y hundió la mirada en la lista de «entrantes fríos».

Recorrió con la mirada los nombres de los platos impresos en su lengua materna y en las lenguas más importantes del mundo, volvió la crujiente página de cartón, echó una ojeada a la sección «Sopas», movió los labios y desvió la mirada a las subsecciones: «Platos de carne... Platos de caza menor».

Y en ese instante, mientras se debatía entre la carne y la caza menor, el camarero, adivinando su indecisión, anunció:

—El filete y el solomillo hoy son excepcionales.

Pineguin permaneció un largo rato callado.

—Bueno, que sea un filete —dijo.

Estaba sentado en la penumbra, en silencio, con los ojos entornados, y el convencimiento de que la suya había sido una vida justa pugnaba con la confusión y el horror que habían resucitado en él, con el fuego y el hielo del arrepentimiento.

Pero en ese momento el pesado terciopelo que encortinaba la puerta de la cocina comenzó a moverse, y Pineguin, al reconocer por la cabeza calva a su camarero, pensó: «Es para mí».

La bandeja, emergiendo de la penumbra, flotó hasta Pineguin, y éste vio el rosa ceniciento del salmón entre soles de limón, el negro del caviar, el verde de invernadero de los pepinos, los lados escarpados de una garrafa de vodka y una botella de agua mineral.

No es que fuera un sibarita, ni tampoco tenía tanto apetito, pero en aquel preciso instante al viejo enfundado en el chaquetón dejó de perturbarle la conciencia.

9

AL llegar a la estación, Iván Grigórievich sintió que ahora ya no tenía sentido deambular por las calles de Leningrado. Permaneció plantado en medio del alto y frío edificio, absorto en sus pensamientos. Tal vez los que pasaban al lado de aquel viejo que consultaba el negro tablero con los horarios pensaban: «Mira, ahí va un hombre ruso que ha salido de un campo; está en una encrucijada, hace conjeturas, escoge su camino». Pero no, él no estaba escogiendo su camino.

Decenas de jueces instructores, a lo largo de su vida, habían comprendido que él no era ni monárquico, ni socialrevolucionario ni socialdemócrata, que no pertenecía a la oposición trotskista ni a la oposición bujarinista. No formaba parte de la nueva ni de la vieja Iglesia, ni siquiera de los adventistas del Séptimo Día.

En la estación, pensando en los duros días pasados en Moscú y Leningrado, le volvió a la mente una conversación mantenida con un general de la artillería zarista, compañero de catre en el campo. El viejo le había dicho: «No dejaría el campo por ningún otro sitio: aquí estoy a resguardo, conozco a la gente; del paquete que reciben, algunos me dan un terrón de azúcar, otros una empanada».

No era raro encontrarse a viejos así, que no querían irse del campo; su casa estaba allí, con la comida a las horas establecidas, las limosnas de los buenos compañeros, el calor de la estufa.

Y la verdad, adonde iban a ir: algunos conservaban en las profundidades calcificadas de sus corazones el recuerdo del resplandor de las arañas de cristal del palacio de Tsárskoye Seló, del sol invernal de Niza; otros recordaban a Mendeléyev, que llegaba a su casa como un buen vecino para tomar el té en familia, al joven Blok, a Skriabin y a Repin; otros aún conservaban las cenizas calientes del recuerdo de Plejánov, Gershun, Trigon: los amigos del gran Zheliábov. Se habían dado casos de viejos puestos en libertad que habían pedido ser readmitidos en el campo: el torbellino de la vida hacía temblar sus débiles piernas, les asustaban las ciudades inmensas, frías y sin calor humano.

Iván Grigórievich sentía el deseo de traspasar nuevamente el alambre de espino en busca de aquellos que estaban acostumbrados a abrigarse con harapos, a la escudilla llena de bodrio, a la estufa del barracón. Tenía ganas de decirles: «Es cierto, es espantoso vivir en libertad».

Les contaría a los viejos sin fuerzas que había ido a casa de un pariente

cercano, que se había acercado a la casa donde vivía la mujer a la que amaba, cómo se había encontrado casualmente con un compañero de la universidad, que le había ofrecido ayuda.

Y después les diría a los viejos del campo que no había felicidad más grande que salir del campo —ya fuera ciego, sin piernas, arrastrándose sobre el vientre— y morir en libertad, aunque fuese, tan sólo, a diez metros del maldito alambre de espino.

10

UNA sensación de calma y tristeza se apoderó de Iván Grigórievich cuando las gestiones para encontrar una vivienda y un trabajo finalizaron, y, contratado como operario en un artel[16] para inválidos, vio aparecer en su pasaporte el anhelado sello del permiso de residencia y pudo alquilar por cuarenta rublos un rincón a la viuda del sargento Mijaliov, muerto en el frente.

En casa de Anna Serguéyevna —una mujer delgada, todavía joven pese a sus cabellos canosos— vivía un sobrino de doce años, hijo de una hermana muerta, un chico pálido que siempre llevaba una chaqueta zurcida con retales y tan asombrosamente tímido, silencioso y lleno de curiosidad como sólo los hay en las familias míseras, pobres. En la pared colgaba un retrato de Mijaliov: un hombre de cara triste, como si ya entonces, cuando le tomaron la fotografía, previese cuál sería su destino. El hijo de Anna Serguéyevna prestaba servicio militar en destacamentos de escolta.

Su fotografía —tenía los mofletes abultados y llevaba el pelo cortado al rape— estaba colgada junto a la de su padre.

A Mijaliov lo habían dado por desaparecido durante los primeros días de la guerra, cuando la unidad en la que servía, no lejos de la frontera, fue destruida por los tanques alemanes; nadie pudo testimoniar si Mijaliov se había quedado allí, sin recibir sepultura, muerto por un tirador alemán, o bien se había entregado al enemigo, razón por la cual el comisariado de guerra no le había concedido una pensión a la viuda.

Anna Mijaliova trabajaba como cocinera en un comedor. Pero su vida era dura. Su hermana mayor, que trabajaba en un koljós, una vez le había enviado del campo un paquete para el sobrino huérfano: una torta seca de harina negra y salvado, y miel turbia con restos de cera.

También Mijaliova, cuando tenía oportunidad, enviaba alimentos a la hermana en el campo: harina, aceite de girasol y, en algunos casos, pan blanco y azúcar.

A Iván Grigorievich le sorprendía que Anna Serguéyevna, pese a trabajar en una cocina, estuviese delgaducha y pálida. En el campo se reconocía de inmediato, entre la multitud de detenidos, al cocinero por su cara llena.

Mijaliova no hacía preguntas a Iván Grigorievich acerca de su vida pasada

en los campos. El único que le interrogó en detalle fue el responsable de personal del artel. Pero Anna Serguéyevna, sin preguntar nada, había descubierto muchas cosas observando a Iván Grigórievich con sus ojos acostumbrados a comprender la vida.

Podía dormir sobre tablones, bebía agua caliente sin té ni azúcar, masticaba pan seco, en lugar de calcetines se enrollaba los pies con trozos de tela, no tenía ropa de cama pero ella había notado que la camisa que se ponía, aunque amarillenta de tanto lavarla, tenía el cuello limpio, y que cada mañana cogía una caja de caramelos arrugada y desconchada, se lavaba los dientes con el cepillo y después se enjabonaba concienzudamente la cara, el cuello y los brazos hasta el codo.

El silencio nocturno le parecía extraño a Iván Grigórievich. Durante décadas se había acostumbrado a los ronquidos, al resoplido colectivo, a los bisbíseos, a los gemidos de los cientos de personas que dormían en los barracones, al ruido de los martillos, al rechinar de las ruedas. En todo ese tiempo, únicamente había estado solo en celdas de castigo, y aquella vez, en el curso de la instrucción, en que lo habían mantenido aislado durante tres meses y medio. Pero el silencio de ahora no tenía la tensión del silencio en la celda.

Había encontrado trabajo en el artel por una feliz casualidad: en un jardín público había intercambiado unas palabras con un tipo, un tísico tan encorvado que parecía un patín de trineo colocado en vertical. Éste le había contado que dejaba su puesto de trabajo como contable en un artel para inválidos, que se iba; se iba porque no quería que le enterraran en aquella ciudad donde el cementerio se hallaba en una zona pantanosa y los ataúdes flotaban en el agua. Y el contable, después de morir, quería reposar con todas las comodidades. Había ahorrado dinero para un féretro de roble, había comprado tela roja de buena calidad para tapizarlo por dentro y una caja de clavos de cobre, de esos que se utilizaban para revestir los sofás de cuero de las estaciones. No quería mojarse con todos aquellos bienes.

Hablaba de todo esto con la voz tranquila de un hombre que se dispone a mudarse a un apartamento nuevo, más cómodo.

Recomendado por el «nuevo inquilino», como Iván Grigorievich lo había motejado en su fuero interno, encontró un puesto como operario en el artel, donde fabricaban cerraduras y llaves además de estañar y soldar menaje de cocina. A Iván Grigorievich le resultaron muy útiles las habilidades que en un tiempo había adquirido en los campos como mecánico en un taller de reparaciones.

Entre los obreros había lisiados de la Segunda Guerra Mundial, tullidos a

causa de accidentes laborales en la industria o en el transporte e incluso tres ancianos que habían sufrido mutilaciones en la guerra de 1914. En el artel encontró a un veterano de los campos: Mordan, un obrero de la fábrica Putílov, condenado en 1936 por el artículo 58[17] y puesto en libertad después de acabar la guerra. Mordan no había querido volver a Leningrado, donde su mujer e hija habían muerto durante el sitio, así que se había ido a vivir con su hermana, a una ciudad del sur, y había comenzado a trabajar en el artel.

Los inválidos del artel eran, la mayoría de las veces, gente alegre que se inclinaba por tomarse la vida con humor, pero a veces alguno tenía un ataque epiléptico y el estruendo de los martillos y la estridencia de las limas se mezclaban con el grito del epiléptico que comenzaba a golpearse contra el suelo.

A Patashkovski, un estañador con los bigotes canosos, hecho prisionero en la guerra de 1914 (decían que era austríaco pero se hacía pasar por polaco), se le agarrotaban de repente las manos y se quedaba petrificado en su banqueta, con el martillo levantado, la cara inmóvil, una expresión altiva. Para desentumecerlo había que cogerlo por los hombros y sacudirlo. En otra ocasión el ataque epiléptico de uno de los inválidos provocó una reacción en cadena a muchos otros, y por todo el taller tanto jóvenes como viejos comenzaron a gritar y a golpearse contra el suelo.

Iván Grigórievich experimentaba una sensación insólita, hermosa: trabajaba como un asalariado libre, sin escoltas ni centinelas apostados en las torres de observación. Era extraño: el trabajo era casi el mismo, las herramientas le resultaban familiares, pero nadie le llamaba carroña, ningún ladrón le levantaba la mano, ningún perro le amenazaba con un bastón.Iván Grigorievich pronto descubrió los métodos que empleaba la gente para redondear sus modestos ingresos. Algunos compraban por cuenta propia, de manera privada, el material y fabricaban cacerolas y teteras. Las vendían a través del artel, al precio estatal, ni más ni menos. Otros se ponían de acuerdo con los clientes para reparar en privado cachivaches de todo tipo y se quedaban el dinero sin firmar ningún recibo. Les cobraban el mismo precio que fijaba el Estado, ni más ni menos.

Mordan, cuyas manos eran tan grandes que parecía que en invierno pudiera utilizarlas para rastrillar la nieve de las aceras, contó un día, durante la pausa para comer, lo que había pasado el día antes en su edificio. En el piso de al lado vivían cinco vecinos: un tornero, un sastre, un electricista de un taller mecánico y dos viudas, una que trabajaba en una fábrica de confección y otra como mujer de la limpieza en el soviet municipal. Y he aquí que, en su día de descanso, las dos viudas se encontraron cara a cara en la comisaría: agentes del OBJSS[18] las habían detenido en la calle por vender bolsas de redecilla que tejían por la noche a

escondidas la una de la otra. La milicia efectuó un registro en el piso, y resultó que por las noches el sastre cosía abrigos de mujer y niño, el electricista había instalado bajo el suelo un pequeño horno eléctrico y cocinaba barquillos que la mujer iba a vender al mercado, el tornero de la fábrica Antorcha Roja se convertía en zapatero por las noches: confeccionaba zapatos de moda para mujeres, y las viudas no sólo tejían bolsas de redecilla para la compra sino también blusas.

Mordan hacía reír al auditorio imitando cómo el electricista gritaba que los barquillos que cocinaba eran para su familia, y al inspector del OBJSS preguntándole si de verdad había preparado treinta y dos kilos de pasta para su familia. A cada infractor le cayó una multa de trescientos rublos, se informó de dicha falta en sus respectivos puestos de trabajo y se les amenazó con la deportación «para limpiar la vida soviética de parásitos y elementos improductivos».

A Mordan le gustaba usar palabras cultas al hablar: cuando revisaba una cerradura estropeada decía con gravedad: «Sí, la cerradura no reacciona a la llave en absoluto». Un día, caminando por la calle con Iván Grigórievich después del trabajo, le había dicho de repente:

—Si no he vuelto a Leningrado no es sólo porque mi mujer y mi hija han muerto. No puedo ver, con mis ojos de obrero, la suerte que ha corrido el proletariado de Putílov. Ni siquiera podemos hacer huelga. ¿Y qué clase de obrero es ese que no tiene derecho a huelga?

Por la tarde la propietaria volvía a casa. Traía en una cesta comida para el sobrino: sopa en un bidoncito y el segundo plato en una cazuela de barro.

—¿Quiere comer un poco? —le preguntaba en voz baja a Iván Grigórievich— Hay de sobra.

—Ya veo; usted no come —decía Iván Grigórievich.

—Como todo el día, forma parte de mi trabajo —le respondía ella, y comprendiendo su mirada, añadía—: Me canso tanto en el trabajo...

Los primeros días a Iván Grigorievich le había parecido que la cara pálida de la dueña de la casa destilaba maldad. Después entendió que era buena. A veces le hablaba del campo. Había sido jefa de brigada de un koljós y, durante un tiempo, incluso la presidenta. Los koljoses no cumplían con el plan: ahora la siembra no era suficiente, ahora había sequía, ahora la tierra se agrietaba y, exhausta, ya no daba frutos, ahora los hombres y los jóvenes se iban a la ciudad... Y si el koljós no entregaba lo establecido, recibían seis o siete kopeks por jornada de trabajo y sólo cien gramos de grano por cabeza; y algunos años no recibían ni siquiera un gramo. Y a nadie le gusta trabajar gratis. Los koljosianos no podían más. Comían pan de

centeno sin patatas ni bellotas. No comían pan auténtico más que los días de fiesta, a modo de tarta. Un día le llevó pan blanco a su hermana mayor al pueblo, y los niños tenían miedo de comérselo: era la primera vez en su vida que lo veían. Las isbas envejecían, se venían abajo; no se entregaba madera para la construcción.

Escuchaba a Anna Serguéyevna y la miraba. De ella emanaba una dulce luz de bondad, de feminidad. Había estado décadas sin ver a ninguna mujer, pero durante muchos años había escuchado las infinitas historias que se explicaban en los barracones: historias sangrientas, tristes, sucias. La mujer, en esos relatos, era a veces un ser bajo, inferior a los animales, y otras un ser puro, sublime, superior a las santas. Pero para los detenidos la idea constante de la mujer era tan imprescindible como las raciones de pan; estaba siempre presente en sus conversaciones, en sus visiones, en sus sueños puros o turbios.

Lo cierto es que era extraño —porque, después de su liberación, había visto a mujeres bellas y elegantes en las calles de Moscú y de Leningrado, y se había sentado a la mesa con María Pávlovna, una hermosa mujer de cabello cano—, pero ni el dolor que le había invadido cuando se había enterado de que el amor de su juventud le había traicionado, ni el encanto de la belleza y la elegancia femenina, ni la atmósfera íntima y acogedora de la casa de María Pávlovna, habían suscitado en él ese sentimiento que experimentaba escuchando a Anna Serguéyevna, mirando sus ojos tristes, su dulce cara marchita y a la vez juvenil.

Y al mismo tiempo no había nada extraño en ello. No podía ser extraño aquello que sucede siempre, desde hace miles de años, entre hombre y mujer.

Y ella le explicaba a Iván Grigórievich:

—Mandar a los hambrientos a trabajar te rompe el corazón. Ah, no es para mí ese dicho según el cual la cocinera debería ser capaz de dirigir el Estado. Las mujeres que trabajan en la trilladora se cosen una media en el dobladillo de la falda y la llenan de grano. ¡Habría que registrarlas y someterlas al tribunal! Y por el hurto de bienes propiedad del koljós no te caen menos de siete años. Pero aquellas mujeres tenían niños. Una noche, tumbada en la cama, pensaba: el Estado compra el grano del koljós a seis kopeks el kilo y vende el pan a un rublo el kilo; en nuestro koljós, además, hace cuatro años que no nos dan ni un gramo de grano. ¿Y cuál es el resultado? Si sustraen un puñado de grano que, a fin de cuentas, ellos han sembrado, los condenan a siete años. No, no estoy de acuerdo. Y así, con ayuda de algunos paisanos, me coloqué en la ciudad como cocinera, para alimentar a la gente... Los obreros dicen: «Después de todo, en la ciudad se está mejor». Los obreros de la construcción tienen tarifas: dos rublos y medio por poner una puerta y encajar una cerradura, pero por ese mismo servicio en un día festivo un particular paga cincuenta rublos. El Estado paga veinticinco veces menos. Aun así,

en el campo es donde se llevan la peor parte. A mi modo de ver, el Estado les quita demasiado, ya sea a la gente de la ciudad o a la del campo. Sí, de acuerdo, las casas de reposo, las escuelas, los tractores, la defensa nacional..., entiendo todo eso, pero se llevan demasiado, deberían llevarse menos.

Miró a Iván Grigorievich.

—¿Es posible que ésta sea la causa de que toda la vida esté mal organizada?

Después su mirada se deslizó lentamente de la cara de Iván Grigorievich a la del sobrino, y dijo:

—Sé que no hay que hablar de estas cosas. Pero me doy cuenta de qué clase de persona es usted. Por eso le he hecho esta pregunta. Pero usted no sabe qué clase de persona soy yo, por eso no responde.

—No, ¿por qué dice eso? Le daré una respuesta —dijo Iván Grigorievich—. Antes creía que la libertad era libertad de palabra, de prensa, de conciencia. Pero la libertad se extiende a la vida de todos los hombres. La libertad es el derecho a sembrar lo que uno quiera, a confeccionar zapatos y abrigos, a hacer pan con el grano que uno ha sembrado, y a venderlo o no venderlo, lo que uno quiera. Y tanto si uno es cerrajero como fundidor de acero o artista, la libertad es el derecho a vivir y trabajar como uno prefiera y no como le ordenen. Pero no hay libertad ni para los que escriben libros ni para los que cultivan el grano o hacen zapatos.

En la oscuridad de la noche, Iván Grigorievich, echado en la cama, oyó la respiración de alguien dormido, una respiración tan ligera que no podía saber si era la del niño o la de la mujer.

Le embargó una extraña sensación, como si toda su vida hubiera transcurrido viajando día y noche en el interior de un vagón chirriante y durante décadas hubiese oído el rumor sordo de las ruedas, y ahora por fin hubiese llegado a destino: el convoy se había detenido.

Pero aquellos treinta años de trayecto, aquel estruendo del tren que se había prolongado durante una treintena de años seguía tronándole en la cabeza, le resonaba en los oídos, como si el convoy corriese, corriese...

Pero no era el ruido del viaje lo que le zumbaba en los oídos: en su cabeza retumbaba la esclerosis, la vida que tocaba a su fin.

11

ALIOSHA, el sobrino de Anna Serguéyevna, era tan bajo de estatura que parecía tener ocho años. Estaba en sexto curso y, al volver de la escuela, una vez había transportado el agua y lavado los platos, se ponía a hacer sus deberes.

A veces levantaba los ojos hacia Iván Grigorievich y le decía:

—Pregúntame de historia, por favor.

Un día que Aliosha estaba estudiando biología, Iván Grigorievich, para pasar el rato, se puso a modelar figuritas de barro de diferentes animales que estaban dibujados en el libro de texto: una jirafa, un rinoceronte, un gorila. Aliosha se quedó boquiabierto ante los animales hechos de barro, que le parecían muy bonitos. Los miraba, los cambiaba de sitio; por la noche los colocó a su lado, sobre una silla, junto a la cama. Al amanecer, antes de ir a hacer cola para la leche, el niño preguntó con un susurro apasionado al inquilino, que se estaba lavando en el pasillo:

—Iván Grigorievich, ¿puedo llevarme sus animales a la escuela?

—Claro, por favor, son tuyos —respondió Iván Grigorievich.

Por la tarde Aliosha contó a Iván Grigorievich que la profesora de dibujo le había dicho:—Dile de mi parte a tu inquilino que, con sus aptitudes, debería tomar clases sin falta.

Mijaliova, que por primera vez había visto a Iván Grigorievich reírse, le dijo:

—Vaya a ver a la profesora y no se ría; tal vez podría redondear el sueldo trabajando por las tardes; ¿no ve la vida que lleva ganando trescientos setenta y cinco rublos al mes...?

—No importa, a mí me bastan —dijo Iván Grigorievich—; y eso de estudiar tendría que haberlo hecho hace treinta años.

Al instante pensó: «¿Por qué me inquieto? ¿Quiere decir eso que estoy vivo? ¿O estoy muerto?».

Un día Iván Grigorievich le estaba explicando a Aliosha la expedición de Tamerlán y notó que Anna Serguéyevna, que había dejado de coser, lo escuchaba atentamente.

—Su lugar no está en un artel —le dijo riendo.

—Ay —replicó él—. ¿Qué otra cosa podría hacer? Todos mis conocimientos proceden de libros con páginas arrancadas, sin principio ni fin.

Aliosha pensó que tal vez por eso Iván Grigorievich inventaba a voluntad, mientras que los maestros recitaban el libro de texto de cabo a rabo.

Esta historia fútil, la de las figuritas de arcilla, turbó a Iván Grigorievich. Por supuesto, no poseía un verdadero talento. Pero ¿cuántos jóvenes físicos, historiadores, especialistas en lenguas antiguas, filósofos, músicos, jóvenes Swift y Erasmos de Rotterdam rusos había visto morir con sus propios ojos, «les habían enfundado en el abrigo de madera»?

La literatura prerrevolucionaria a menudo lloraba la triste suerte de los actores, músicos y pintores nacidos siervos. Pero ¿quién, en la literatura actual, ha suspirado por aquellos jóvenes y muchachas a los que no les fue dado pintar sus cuadros y escribir sus libros? La tierra rusa engendra en abundancia a sus propios Platónov y a sus Newton de mente ágil, pero con qué atroz sencillez devora a sus hijos.

El teatro y el cine suscitaban en Iván Grigorievich tristeza y angustia; le daba la impresión de que alguien le obligaba a mirar fijamente el escenario y no le dejaba salir. Muchas novelas y poesías le provocaban una insoportable sensación de fastidio, casi como si quisieran meterle algo en la cabeza. Le parecía que en los libros se describía una vida diferente, desconocida para él, donde no existían barracones de máxima seguridad, ni jefes de brigada, ni vigilantes, ni delegados operativos[19], ni sistemas de pasaporte, ni ninguno de aquellos sentimientos, sufrimientos y miedos que experimentaban los hombres a su alrededor...

Los escritores inventaban a la gente, sus ideas y sus sentimientos, inventaban las habitaciones donde vivían, los trenes en los que viajaban: la literatura que se llamaba realista no era menos convencional que las novelas bucólicas del siglo XVIII. Los koljosianos, los obreros y las campesinas de la literatura parecían emparentados con aquellos aldeanos bien ataviados y esbeltos, con aquellas pastorcillas de cabellos rizados que tocaban el flautín y bailaban en los prados entre blancos borreguitos adornados con cintas azules.

Durante los años pasados en los campos, Iván Grigorievich había aprendido muchas cosas sobre las debilidades humanas. Ahora veía claramente que esas debilidades existían a ambos lados de la alambrada... Los sufrimientos no sólo purificaban. En los campos, la lucha por obtener una cucharada más de sopa o privilegios en el trabajo era feroz, y los débiles se rebajaban hasta un nivel lamentable. Ahora, en libertad, Iván Grigorievich intuía que otras personas, altivas y bien cuidadas, también rebañarían con la cuchara las escudillas que otros habían

vaciado o acecharían ávidamente, como chacales, alrededor de la cocina en busca de mondas y hojas podridas de col.

La gente abatida, oprimida por la violencia, la inanición, la falta de calor, de tabaco, que se convertía en chacales de los campos, con la mirada errática a la búsqueda de migajas de pan y colillas baboseadas, le inspiraba compasión.

La gente de los campos le ayudaba a comprender a los hombres en libertad. Había visto en estos últimos la misma lastimosa debilidad, crueldad, avidez y miedo que en los barracones de los campos. Todos eran idénticos, y los compadecía.

En las novelas y las poesías, los soviéticos, de la misma manera que en el arte medieval, expresaban su idea de la Iglesia, de Dios; aclamaban al verdadero Dios, el hombre no existía por sí mismo sino por Dios, existía para cantar alabanzas a ese Dios y a esa Iglesia. Ciertos escritores, tratando de hacer pasar la mentira por verdad, reproducían con especial esmero los detalles de la ropa, el mobiliario, y poblaban sus vividas escenografías de personajes imaginarios en busca de Dios.

Y tanto en libertad como en los campos la gente no quería reconocer que todos eran exactamente iguales en su derecho a la libertad. Algunos desviacionistas de derechas se creían inocentes, pero consideraban justas las represiones contra los desviacionistas de izquierdas. Ni los de derechas ni los de izquierdas apreciaban a los así llamados espías: a los que se carteaban con familiares que se encontraban en el extranjero o bien a aquellos cuyos padres rusificados tenían apellidos polacos, letones o alemanes.

Por mucho que los campesinos dijeran que habían vivido toda su vida del trabajo de sus manos, los prisioneros políticos no les creían: «Sabemos que si hubieseis sido pobres no os habrían deskulakizado».

Iván Grigorievich le había dicho una vez a su vecino de catre, un ex comandante del Ejército Rojo:

—¿Cómo es posible que usted, que ha entregado su vida a la idea del bolchevismo, un héroe de la guerra civil, esté aquí detenido acusado de espionaje?

Aquél le respondió:

—Conmigo cometieron un error, pero el mío es un caso particular. No se puede comparar siquiera...

Cuando los delincuentes comunes, después de escoger a una víctima, empezaban a torturarla y a robarle, algunos presos políticos giraban la cara, otros se quedaban sentados con una expresión embotada e inmóvil en sus caras, otros se alejaban o bien se hacían los dormidos, tapándose la cabeza con la colcha.

Cientos de detenidos, entre ellos ex combatientes y héroes de guerra, se sentían impotentes frente a un puñado de delincuentes comunes. Éstos armaban escándalo, se consideraban a sí mismos patriotas y a los presos políticos fascistas, enemigos de la patria. En los campos, los hombres, cada uno por sí mismo, eran como granos secos de arena.

Uno estaba convencido de que sólo se había cometido un error con él, pero que, en general, «no detenían a la gente sin motivo».

Otros razonaban así: cuando estábamos en libertad pensábamos que no detenían a la gente porque sí, pero ahora hemos comprendido en nuestra propia piel que pueden detenerte por nada. Pero no extraían ninguna conclusión de ello; se limitaban a suspirar, resignados.

Un trabajador de la Internacional de la Juventud Comunista, ortodoxo y dialéctico, un hombre demacrado que sufría constantes crisis nerviosas, explicó a Iván Grigorievich que no había cometido ningún delito contra el Partido, pero que los órganos de seguridad habían tenido razón al arrestarlo como espía y traidor; sí, no había cometido ningún delito, pero pertenecía a un sector hostil al Partido, un sector que había dado a luz traidores, trotskistas, oportunistas y escépticos.

Un preso inteligente, ex funcionario regional del Partido, conversando un día con Iván Grigorievich, le había dicho:

—Cuando se tala el bosque, las astillas vuelan, pero la verdad del Partido es siempre la verdad y está por encima de mi desgracia. —Y, señalándose a sí mismo con una mano, añadió—: Yo soy una de esas astillas.

Éste se quedó desconcertado cuando Iván Grigorievich le dijo:

—Precisamente en eso consiste la desgracia: ¿para qué talar el bosque?

Eran contadas las ocasiones en que Iván Grigorievich se había encontrado en el campo con gente que realmente hubiera luchado contra el poder soviético.

Los antiguos oficiales zaristas no habían ido a parar al campo por haber formado una organización monárquica sino porque habrían podido hacerlo.

En los campos cumplían pena socialdemócratas y socialrevolucionarios. Muchos de ellos habían sido arrestados cuando habían comenzado a mostrarse leales e inactivos políticamente. No los habían encarcelado porque hubieran luchado contra el Estado soviético sino porque existía una posibilidad de que lo hicieran.

Los campesinos eran enviados a los campos, y no porque lucharan contra los koljoses. Los encerraban porque, en determinadas condiciones, habrían podido oponerse a ellos.

Algunos acababan en los campos por haber expresado una crítica inocente: a uno no le gustaban los libros y las obras teatrales premiadas por el Estado, a otro la radio nacional y los bolígrafos. En determinadas circunstancias esa gente habría podido convertirse en enemigos del pueblo.

Otras personas habían sido confinadas en el campo por haber mantenido correspondencia con una tía o un hermano que vivían en el extranjero: tenían más posibilidades de convertirse en espías que los que no tenían parientes en el extranjero.

No se ejercía el terror contra los criminales sino contra las personas que, según los órganos de represión, tenían mayor posibilidad de acabar siéndolo.

Aparte de ese tipo de presos había otros en los campos que sí eran verdaderamente hostiles al poder soviético, que habían luchado contra él: viejos socialistas—revolucionarios, mencheviques, anarquistas o partidarios de la independencia de Ucrania, Letonia, Estonia y Lituania, y durante la guerra, partidarios de Stepán Bandera.

Los presos soviéticos los consideraban sus enemigos, pero al mismo tiempo admiraban a aquellos hombres a los que habían encarcelado por una causa.

En un campo de régimen especial Iván Grigórievich se había encontrado con un adolescente, un escolar, Boria Romashkin, condenado a diez años de reclusión: había compuesto unas octavillas donde acusaba al Estado de tomar represalias contra gente inocente, las había escrito a máquina y las había fijado por la noche en las fachadas de algunas casas de Moscú. Boria había contado a Iván Grigórievich que en el curso de la instrucción le habían ido a ver decenas de funcionarios del ministerio de la seguridad nacional, entre ellos algunos generales: todos estaban interesados en aquel muchacho, arrestado por una verdadera causa. Boria también era famoso en el campo, todo el mundo le conocía, los prisioneros de los campos vecinos preguntaban por él. Cuando Iván Grigorievich, después de ochocientos kilómetros recorridos en etapas, llegó a un nuevo campo, oyó hablan desde la primera tarde, de Boria Romashkin: su fama corría por toda Kolimá.

Pero lo sorprendente era que la gente condenada por una causa, por haber luchado verdaderamente contra el Estado soviético, consideraba que todos los presos políticos eran inocentes, que todos sin excepción merecían estar en libertad. Y aquellos que estaban presos por embustes, por causas imaginadas e inventadas —y había millones de personas en esas condiciones—, tendían a amnistiarse sólo a sí mismos y se esforzaban en demostrar la auténtica culpa de espías, kulaks y saboteadores, en justificar la crueldad del Estado.

Entre la mentalidad de los presos y la de los hombres que vivían en libertad

había una diferencia profunda. Iván Grigorievich veía que los hombres del campo se mantenían fieles a la época que los había engendrado. En los caracteres y en las ideas de cada uno de ellos vivían varias épocas de la vida rusa. Allí había combatientes de la guerra civil con sus canciones, libros y personajes favoritos; allí había verdes, partidarios de Petliura, con las imborrables pasiones de su tiempo, con sus canciones, sus poesías, sus costumbres; allí había militantes del Komintern de los años veinte, con su entusiasmo, su vocabulario, su filosofía, su manera de comportarse, de pronunciar las palabras; allí había hombres ancianos: monárquicos, mencheviques, socialistas—revolucionarios, que conservaban dentro de sí un mundo de ideas, de comportamientos, de personajes literarios de hacía cuarenta o cincuenta años.

Se podía reconocer a primera vista en un viejo andrajoso, con tos persistente, al débil, decadente aunque siempre noble caballero de la guardia real, y en su vecino de catre, igual de harapiento, con una barba cana sin afeitar, a un socialdemócrata empedernido, y en el enfermero encorvado, a un enchufado, al comisario de un tren blindado.

En cambio, las personas de cierta edad que vivían en libertad no llevaban sobre sí las señas inconfundibles del pasado. El pasado en ellos se había borrado; les resultaba fácil asumir el aspecto del nuevo día: pensaban y vivían en consonancia con el presente. Su jerga, sus ideas, sus pasiones y su sinceridad se adaptaban dóciles y flexibles al curso de los acontecimientos y a la voluntad de las autoridades.

¿Cómo se explicaba esta diferencia? Tal vez en el campo el hombre se aletargase, como anestesiado.

Cuando vivía en el campo, Iván Grigorievich había constatado incesantemente la natural aspiración de los hombres a escaparse de la alambrada, a volver con sus mujeres e hijos. Pero en libertad se había encontrado con gente liberada del campo, y su hipócrita sumisión, el miedo a expresar los propios pensamientos y el horror ante un nuevo arresto eran tan grandes que parecían todavía más encarcelados que cuando se hallaban en los campos de trabajos forzados.

Pese a haber salido de allí, trabajar libremente y vivir con sus seres queridos y allegados, aquellos hombres a veces se condenaban a una forma de cautividad mucho más rigurosa, más total que aquella a la que les constreñían las alambradas del campo.

Y sin embargo, en medio de los tormentos, la suciedad y la penuria de la vida concentracionaria, la libertad era la luz y la fuerza de aquellas almas cautivas.

La libertad era inmortal.

Viviendo en aquella pequeña ciudad, en casa de la viuda del sargento Mijaliov, Iván Grigorievich comenzó a percibir con más fuerza y amplitud el sentido de la libertad.

En el combate que la gente libraba cada día por vivir, en los artificios a los que recurrían los obreros para ganar un rublo más trabajando de noche, en la lucha de los koljosianos por obtener pan y patatas como única ganancia a su trabajo, Iván Grigorievich adivinaba no sólo el deseo de vivir mejor, de alimentar abundantemente a sus hijos y vestirlos. En la lucha por el derecho a confeccionar botas, tejer chaquetas, en la aspiración a sembrar aquello que el labrador quería, se manifestaba aquel deseo natural e indestructible, inherente a la naturaleza humana, que es el deseo de libertad. Y esa misma aspiración la veía y reconocía en la gente del campo. La libertad parecía inmortal a ambos lados del alambre de espino.

Una noche, después del trabajo, comenzó a repasar mentalmente las palabras que utilizaba en el campo. Dios mío, a cada letra del alfabeto le correspondía una palabra concentracionaria... Y sobre cada una se habrían podido escribir artículos, poemas, novelas...«A» de arresto, «b» de barracón, «c» de campos de mujeres, «d» de dojodiaga...[20], así hasta el final del alfabeto: «z» de zek[21] Un mundo inmenso, con su propia lengua, su economía, su código moral. Sí, con los libros que se podrían escribir se llenarían estanterías enteras: ocuparían más espacio que la Historia de las fábricas y las empresas industriales emprendida por Gorki.

He aquí un tema: la historia de un convoy. Formación del convoy, el convoy en marcha, vigilancia del convoy... Qué ingenuos y familiares parecen los convoyes de los años veinte a los prisioneros actuales: el deportado político instalado en un compartimento del vagón de pasajeros en compañía de un guardia filósofo que le obsequia con pastelillos rellenos de carne... Eran los tímidos embriones de la cultura concentracionaria: canosa edad de piedra, un pollito apenas salido del cascarón...

Ahora, en cambio, un convoy de sesenta vagones va hacia la región de Krasnoyarsk: una ciudad carcelaria móvil, vagones de mercancías de cuatro ejes, ventanillas enrejadas, catres en tres pisos, vagones depósito, vagones llenos de vigilantes, vagones cocina, vagones con perros policiales que durante las paradas corretean a lo largo del convoy; el jefe del convoy, como el pachá oriental de un cuento, rodeado de los halagos de los cocineros, de las odaliscas—prostitutas. Durante los controles, un vigilante entra en el vagón y los demás guardias, con las armas automáticas apuntando hacia las puertas abiertas del vagón de mercancías,

mantienen bajo mira a los detenidos: los hombres se apiñan formando un grupo compacto, pero el vigilante empuja con habilidad a los detenidos que ha señalado hacia otra parte del vagón, y por mucho que el prisionero se dé prisa, el guardia siempre logra propinarle un bastonazo en el trasero o en el cráneo.

No hace mucho tiempo, poco después de la Gran Guerra Patriótica, se instalaron peines de acero bajo el fondo de los vagones de cola. Si durante el trayecto un detenido desmonta el suelo y se lanza de plano sobre las vías, el peine lo agarrará, lo estirará y lo arrojará bajo las ruedas. ¡Ni para ti ni para mí! Para los que después de romper el techo del vagón se encaraman a él, han instalado proyectores que, como puñales, atraviesan las tinieblas, desde la locomotora hasta el último vagón; y la ametralladora que vela el convoy sabe qué tiene que hacer si un hombre corre sobre el techo... Sí, todo evoluciona. La economía del convoy ha cristalizado. Está todo: el valor añadido, el bienestar de los oficiales del convoy en su vagón de estado mayor, la reducción de las raciones de los detenidos y de los perros, la compensación del traslado calculada en función de los sesenta días de trayecto del convoy hacia los campos de la Siberia Oriental, la circulación de mercancías en el interior de los vagones, la feroz acumulación primitiva y la pauperización paralela. Sí, todo fluye, todo muta, nadie entra dos veces en el mismo convoy.Pero ¿quién describirá la desesperación de ese movimiento que aleja a esos hombres de sus mujeres, aquellas confesiones nocturnas entre el sonido metálico de las ruedas y el chirrido de los vagones, la sumisión, la confianza, el hundimiento en el abismo de los campos; las cartas tiradas desde las tinieblas de los vagones de mercancías a las tinieblas del inmenso buzón de la estepa y que llegaban a su destino?

En el convoy todavía no se tienen las costumbres del campo, no se conoce todavía la fatiga, la cabeza no está llena de las preocupaciones concentracionarias; para el corazón ensangrentado todo es insólito, todo es horrible: la penumbra, los chirridos, los tablones ásperos, la temible agilidad de los ladrones, la mirada de cuarzo de los guardias de escolta.

Alguien levanta sobre los hombros a un chico hasta la ventanilla, y éste grita:

—Abuelo, abuelo, ¿adonde nos llevan?

Y todos en el vagón de mercancías oyen la voz rota, arrastrada, senil:

—A Siberia, querido, a los trabajos forzados...

De repente, Iván Grigórievich pensó: «¿Era de veras mi camino, mi destino? Sí, con aquellos convoyes empezó mi ruta. Pero ahora el viaje ha terminado».

Aquellos recuerdos de los campos, que a menudo le venían de improviso, lo

atormentaban por su carácter caótico. Sentía y recordaba que podía orientarse en el caos, que tenía fuerzas para hacerlo y que ahora, acabado el periplo de los campos, había llegado el momento de ver con claridad, de distinguir las leyes en el caos de los sufrimientos, las contradicciones entre la culpa y la santa inocencia, entre la falsa confesión de sus crímenes y la devoción fanática, entre la absurdidad de la masacre de millones de seres inocentes y de fíeles al Partido y el férreo significado de aquellos asesinatos.

12

EN los últimos días Iván Grigorievich se había mostrado taciturno, casi no hablaba con Anna Serguéyevna. Pero en el trabajo a menudo se acordaba de ella y de Aliosha, y no paraba de mirar el reloj colgado en el taller de cerrajería para saber si faltaba poco para volver a casa.

Y por alguna razón, en aquellos días silenciosos, mientras pensaba en la vida concentracionaria, se había acordado sobre todo del destino de las mujeres en los campos... Nunca, le parecía, había pensado tanto en las mujeres.

La igualdad entre el hombre y la mujer no se estableció en las cátedras y en las obras de los sociólogos. La igualdad se confirmó no sólo en el trabajo de las fábricas, en los vuelos a) espacio o en el fuego de la Revolución: se confirmó en la historia de Rusia, ahora, siempre y por los siglos de los siglos, en los sufrimientos de la servidumbre, de los campos, de los convoyes y de las cárceles.

En los años de servidumbre y en Kolimá, Norilsk y Vorkutá, las mujeres alcanzaron la paridad con los hombres.

El campo confirmó una segunda verdad, tan sencilla como un mandamiento: la vida de hombres y de mujeres es inseparable. Hay una fuerza satánica en prohibir, en reprimir. Apresada por el dique, el agua de los ríos y de los torrentes manifiesta una fuerza misteriosa, oscura. Esta fuerza oscura escondida en el chapoteo amable, en los reflejos de los rayos del sol, en la oscilación de los nenúfares, de repente descubre la maldad implacable del agua, que destruye ¡as piedras e impulsa las aspas de las turbinas a una velocidad de locura.

La potencia del hambre es despiadada si una barrera separa al ser humano de su pan. La buena y natural exigencia de comer se transforma en una fuerza que destruye millones de vidas, constriñe a las madres a comerse a sus propios hijos: la fuerza de la barbarie y el embrutecimiento.

La prohibición que en el campo separa a los hombres de las mujeres deforma sus cuerpos y sus almas.

Todo en la mujer —su ternura, su entrega, su pasión, su instinto maternal— es el pan y el agua de la vida. Y todo esto nace en ella porque en este mundo hay maridos, hijos, padres, hermanos. Y lo que colma la vida de los hombres es la existencia de mujeres, madres, hijas, hermanas.

Pero he aquí que se introduce en la vida la fuerza de la prohibición. Y todo

lo que hay sencillo y bueno —el pan y el agua de la vida— revela de repente su vil maldad y su tenebrosidad.

Como por obra de un hechizo, la violencia y la prohibición transforman ineludiblemente todo lo bueno en malo en el interior del hombre.

Entre los campos de las mujeres y los campos de los hombres se extendía una estrecha franja de tierra desierta; la llamaban zona de fuego: las ametralladoras abrían fuego en cuanto una persona hacía su aparición en aquella tierra de nadie. Arrastrándose, los delincuentes cruzaban la zona de fuego, cavaban pasos subterráneos, pasaban por debajo de las alambradas o se encaramaban a ellas, y los que no tenían suerte se quedaban allí echados, con la cabeza atravesada por un balazo y las piernas rotas. Todo aquello recordaba el loco y trágico curso de los peces que desovan en los ríos cerrados con diques.

En los siniestros campos de régimen especial —donde por largos años las mujeres no veían la cara de un hombre, no oían una voz masculina—, cuando los mecánicos, los conductores o los carpinteros iban allí por algún trabajo, aquéllas los martirizaban, los torturaban, los mataban. Los hombres delincuentes tenían miedo de aquellos campos donde las mujeres consideraban que tocar la espalda de un hombre muerto era la dicha suprema; tenían miedo de ir allí, incluso bajo la protección de armas de fuego.

Una desdicha lúgubre y tétrica mutilaba a la gente de los campos, los transformaba en monstruos.

En el presidio las mujeres obligaban a otras mujeres a un concubinato contra natura. En los barracones femeninos había unos personajes absurdos: las mujeres—macho, con voces roncas, andares masculinos, maneras viriles, que llevaban los pantalones metidos por dentro de las botas de soldado. Y a su lado surgían unas pobres criaturas perdidas: sus hembras.

Las mujeres—macho bebían chifir[22], fumaban majorka y cuando estaban borrachas golpeaban a sus falsas y frívolas amigas, pero al mismo tiempo las protegían a puñetazos y cuchillazos de las ofensas y las rudas pretensiones de las otras. Aquel trágico y monstruoso mundo de relaciones era el amor en los campos de trabajos forzados. Algo terrible, que no suscitaba la risa ni conversaciones picantes, sino sólo horror en las almas de los ladrones y los asesinos.

En presidio, el frenesí del amor ignoraba las distancias de la taiga, los alambres de espino, las murallas, los centinelas, los muros de piedra, los barracones de máxima seguridad; se exponía a los perros lobo, al filo de la navaja, a los balazos de los guardias. Es así, con los ojos desorbitados, la espina dorsal rota, como desovan los peces salidos del océano, que se lastiman contra las rocas y los

guijarros en los rápidos y las cascadas...

Pero al mismo tiempo, los hombres de los campos conservaban su amor por sus mujeres y sus madres; mientras, las novias «por correspondencia» —que nunca habían visto ni verían a sus novios escogidos por carta de otros campos— estaban dispuestas a soportar cualquier tortura para seguir siendo fieles a su elegido desafortunado, para creer en aquella ficción imaginaria.

Algo se le puede perdonar al hombre si, en el lodo y el hedor de la violencia concentracionaria, continúa siendo un ser humano.

13

DULCE Mashenka... Ahora ya no lleva sus medias finas ni su jersey de lana azul marino. Es difícil mantenerse limpio en un vagón de mercancías: escucha, aguzando el oído a la extraña lengua —se diría que no es ruso— que hablan sus vecinas de litera, las ladronas. Mira con espanto a la reina del convoy: una histérica de labios pálidos, amante de un famoso ladrón de Rostov.

Masha ha lavado el pañuelo en su jarra y con el resto de agua se ha fregado las plantas de los pies. Se extiende el pañuelo sobre las rodillas para secarlo y mira atentamente la penumbra.

Los últimos meses se confunden en una niebla: el llanto de Yulka por haberse indigestado en su tercer cumpleaños, las caras de los agentes que efectuaron el registro en su habitación, la ropa, los dibujos, las muñecas, los platos esparcidos por el suelo, el ficus —regalo de boda de su madre— arrancado de la maceta y tirado en el suelo, la última sonrisa del marido en el umbral de la habitación, una sonrisa lastimosa, que implora fidelidad: al acordarse de aquella sonrisa gritaba, se cogía la cabeza; después las semanas de locura en las que todo seguía como antes, pero al lado de la cacerola donde cocinaba las gachas para Yulka estaba el gélido terror de la Lubianka; las colas en la sala de espera de la prisión interna, la voz de la ventanilla: «No se permiten paquetes», las carreras de casa de un pariente a otro, las direcciones de las personas queridas aprendidas de memoria, la venta apresurada y torpe del armario de espejo y los libros publicados por la Academia, el dolor porque una amiga íntima la había dejado de llamar; y de nuevo los visitantes nocturnos, el registro hasta el amanecer, la despedida de Yulka a la que con total seguridad no habían entregado a la abuela sino en un centro de acogida; la celda de la prisión de Butirki, donde hablaban en susurros, donde las cerillas y las espinas de pescado que sacaban de la sopa servían como agujas de coser; el abigarrado centelleo de decenas de pañuelitos, bragas y sostenes que las detenidas secaban agitándolos en el aire; el interrogatorio nocturno: y fue aquí donde por primera vez en su vida le levantaron el puño, la tutearon, la llamaron ramera, prostituta. La acusaron de no haber denunciado al marido, a quien habían condenado a diez años sin derecho a correspondencia por omisión de denuncia de actos terroristas.

Masha no comprendía por qué ella, y decenas de otras como ella, debían denunciar a sus maridos, por qué Andréi, y cientos de otros como él, debían

denunciar a los compañeros de trabajo, a los amigos de la infancia. El juez instructor la había convocado una sola vez. Luego habían transcurrido ocho meses de cárcel: día y noche, noche y día. La desesperación se había transformado en una espera embotada del destino, y de repente, como una ola marina, la embestía la esperanza, el convencimiento de un pronto reencuentro con su marido y su hija.

Al final, un celador le entregó una hoja pequeña de papel de fumar donde leyó: 58-6-12[23].

Pero ni siquiera después dejó de tener esperanzas: revocarían la sentencia, el marido sería absuelto, Yulia estaría en casa, y volverían a encontrarse para no separarse ya nunca más. Y ante la idea de ese encuentro la inundaban olas cálidas y frías de felicidad.

Una noche la despertaron: «¡Liubímova, recoja sus cosas!». La subieron a un cuervo[24] y, sin ni siquiera pasar por la prisión de tránsito de Krásnaya Presnia, la llevaron a la estación ferroviaria de Yaroslavl y la cargaron en un convoy.

Un recuerdo vivido le volvía una y otra vez a la memoria: la mañana después del arresto de su marido, como si aquella mañana no hubiese aún acabado. La puerta principal del edificio se había cerrado bruscamente, había oído el ruido de un motor y todo quedó sumido en el silencio. El terror irrumpió en su alma. Sonó el teléfono en el pasillo, el ascensor se detuvo de repente en el descansillo de la escalera, delante de su puerta, una vecina salió chancleteando de la cocina, después el chancleteo cesó de golpe.

Limpió con un trapo los libros tirados en el suelo y los volvió a colocar en la estantería, recogió la ropa desparramada por el suelo e hizo con ella un ovillo: quería hervirla, todo lo que estaba dentro de la habitación le parecía sucio. Metió el ficus en la maceta y acarició sus hojas. Andréi se reía de aquella planta, decía que era un símbolo pequeñoburgués y ella, en el fondo, pensaba lo mismo que él. Pero Masha no le permitía que ofendiera a aquel ficus, nunca le había dejado que lo pusiera en la cocina: le daba pena por su pobre madre. Era tan vieja, ahora, su madre, y se lo había llevado como regalo atravesando todo Moscú, cargando con él hasta el cuarto piso porque el ascensor estaba averiado.

¡Todo estaba en silencio! Sin embargo, los vecinos no dormían. La compadecían, pero le tenían miedo, y se sentían colmados de felicidad porque no habían ido a por ellos con una orden de registro y arresto. Yulenka dormía, y ella ordenaba la habitación. No solía esmerarse tanto con la limpieza. En general era indiferente a las cosas; las lámparas de araña y las hermosas vajillas nunca le habían interesado. Algunas personas la consideraban una mala ama de casa, una mujer descuidada. Pero a Andréi le gustaba la indeferencia de Masha hacia las

cosas y el desorden de la habitación. Ahora, no obstante, a ella le parecía que si cada cosa estaba en su lugar se sentiría mejor, más tranquila.

Se miró en el espejo, luego recorrió con la mirada la habitación que acababa de arreglar. Los viajes de Gulliver estaban allí, en la estantería donde se encontraban ayer, antes del registro; el ficus había vuelto a la mesita. Y Yulia, que hasta las cuatro de la madrugada había llorado agarrada a su madre, ahora dormía. El pasillo estaba en silencio, los vecinos todavía no hacían ruido en la cocina.

En su habitación concienzudamente ordenada, Mashenka se hundió en una desesperación lacerante. La ternura y el amor por Andréi la iluminaron, y al instante, en el silencio de la casa, rodeada de objetos familiares, sintió como nunca antes una fuerza despiadada, capaz de inclinar el eje de la Tierra: aquella fuerza se había apoderado de ella, de Yulka, de la pequeña habitación de la cual solía decir:

—No necesito veinte metros cuadrados con un balcón porque aquí soy feliz.

¡Yulia! ¡Andriusha! ¡Se la llevan lejos de ellos! El ruido de las ruedas le desgarra el alma. Se aleja cada vez más de Yulia, cada hora que pasa la acerca a Siberia, a aquella Siberia que le han dado a cambio de la vida con sus seres queridos.

Mashenka ya no lleva su falda de cuadros, la ladrona de labios pálidos se peina el cabello electrizado y crepitante con el peine de Masha.

Sin duda sólo en un joven corazón femenino pueden convivir estos dos tormentos: la inquietud de una madre, el apasionado deseo de salvar a un hijo abandonado, y al mismo tiempo, la infantil sensación de indefensión ante la cólera del Estado, el deseo de esconder la cabeza en el pecho de la madre.

Aquellas uñas sucias y rotas las había llevado arregladas en otro tiempo, el color de su laca de uñas fascinaba a Yulka, a la que su papá había dicho cuando tenía seis años: «Las uñas de mamá son como escamas de pescado». Ya no quedaba ni rastro de la permanente que se había hecho un mes antes del arresto de Andréi, cuando habían ido a festejar el cumpleaños de una amiga, la misma que había dejado de llamarla por teléfono.

Yulenka, su pequeña Yulenka, tan tímida y nerviosa, en un centro de acogida. Masha sofoca un gemido doloroso, los ojos se le enturbian: ¿cómo defender a su pequeña hija de las crueles niñeras del orfelinato, de los niños malvados y traviesos, de la ropa basta y desgarrada del hospicio, de las ásperas sábanas militares, de la almohada llena de agujas de paja?

Y el vagón chirría, las ruedas golpean insistentemente: Moscú y Yulia están cada vez más lejos, Siberia cada vez más cerca.

Dios mío, ¿de veras ha ocurrido todo esto? Por un instante tuvo la impresión de que todo lo que estaba sucediendo no era más que un sueño: la penumbra sofocante, la escudilla de aluminio, aquellas ladronas fumando majorka sobre las tarimas de madera rugosa, la ropa interior sucia, la quemazón del cuerpo y la congoja en el corazón: «Que llegue pronto la próxima parada; al menos los guardias nos protegerán de las delincuentes comunes»; pero después, en las paradas, el terror ante las culatas levantadas de los fusiles y los guardias que proferían insultos modificaban su pensamiento: «Ojalá emprendamos pronto la marcha»; incluso las ladronas decían: «El convoy de Vólogda es peor que la muerte».

Pero su desgracia no residía en las tarimas crujientes, ni en el hielo que cubría las paredes de los vagones en cuanto se apagaba la estufa, ni en la crueldad de los guardias ni en las tropelías de las ladronas. Su desgracia consistía en el hecho de que en el vagón se había atenuado el entumecimiento que había encerrado su corazón como en un capullo durante los ocho meses que había pasado en la celda de la prisión.

Sintió con todo su ser los nueve mil kilómetros de movimiento hacia la profundidad sepulcral de Siberia.

Aquí ya no tenía, como en prisión, aquella esperanza absurda de que un día se abriría la puerta de la celda y el carcelero gritaría: «Liubímova, queda libre, recoja sus cosas»; y entonces saldría a la calle Novoslobódskaya y cogería el autobús para ir a casa, donde la esperarían Andréi y Yulia.

En el vagón ya no hay aturdimiento, ni tampoco el desmemoriado cansancio de los campos; hay sólo un corazón que sangra.

¿Y si Yulia moja la ropa interior? ¿Se lavará las manos, se sonará la nariz? Necesita verduras, y de noche se destapa siempre, duerme casi sin ropa.

Ahora Mashenka ya no tiene zapatos, lleva unas botas de soldado, y la suela de una de ellas está rota. ¿De verdad era ella la María Konstantínovna que leía a Blok, que había estudiado filología, la que escribía poesía a escondidas de Andréi? ¿La Masha que corría a la calle Arbat para reservar hora con el peluquero Iván Afanásievich, también conocido como Jean, la Mashenka que no sólo sabía leer libros sino también hacer borsch y tarta Napoleón, y coser, que había amamantado a la hija? ¿Aquella Masha que siempre admiraba a Andriusha, su laboriosidad, su modestia? ¿Aquella a la que todos admiraban porque amaba a Yulia y Andriusha con tanta devoción, aquella Masha capaz de llorar y de hacer reír, y de ahorrar

hasta la última moneda?

El convoy sigue avanzando, y Masha siente los primeros síntomas del tifus: la cabeza confusa, turbia, pesada. Pero no, nada de tifus, está bien. Y de nuevo, en el tren, la esperanza ha encontrado un sendero hacia su corazón. Pronto llegarían al campo y le gritarían: «Liubímova, sal de la fila, hay un telegrama para ti. Estás libre», etcétera, y así sucesivamente: viaja hacia Moscú en un tren de pasajeros, he aquí Sófrino, Púshkino, la estación de Yaroslavl, ve a Andréi, que tiene a Yulia entre sus brazos.

Y la esperanza le hace languidecer: que lleguen pronto a destino, a Siberia, donde recibirá el telegrama que la declara libre. Cómo se apresuran los pequeños pies de Yulia, corre junto al vagón mientras el tren disminuye la velocidad.

Pero ahí está Masha, expoliada por las ladronas, ahí está bajando del tren, con los dedos helados escondidos en las mangas grasientas de su chaquetón acolchado, la cabeza envuelta en una sucia toalla de felpa. Y a su lado, la nieve cruje como vidrio bajo los zapatos de cientos de mujeres moscovitas, condenadas a diez años de campo por no haber denunciado a sus maridos.

Avanzan con las piernas cubiertas con medias de seda, tropezando con los zapatos de tacón alto. Envidian a Masha, sí, ella ha viajado con las ladronas, no con las «mujeres»; la han saqueado, pero ahora tiene un chaquetón acolchado y puede rellenar sus botas con papeles y trapos.

Tropiezan, se dan prisa, caen, las mujeres de los enemigos del pueblo; recogen a toda prisa sus hatillos y pertenencias, que se han desparramado por la nieve, pero tienen miedo de llorar.

Masha mira a su alrededor: a sus espaldas está el depósito ferroviario, los vagones de mercancías se extienden como collares rojos sobre un cuerpo níveo y delante se retuerce una serpiente negra: son las deportadas que bordean una pila de madera espolvoreada de nieve, los escoltas en pellizas fabulosamente cálidas, los mastines que ladran en su pelaje espeso, caliente. Después de más de dos meses en un convoy, el aire deliciosamente puro es más hiriente que una cuchilla de afeitar. Se ha levantado viento, sobre la tierra virgen corre un polvo de nieve seca, la cabeza de la columna desaparece en una bruma blanca. El frío azota la cara y las piernas, a Masha la cabeza le da vueltas.

Y de improviso —a través del cansancio, a través del miedo al congelamiento y la gangrena, a través del sueño de entrar en calor y tomar un baño, a través del estupor ante la vieja corpulenta que lleva unos quevedos y yace en la nieve con una expresión extraña en la cara, estúpidamente caprichosa—, la joven Masha de veintiséis años vio, envuelto en una niebla blanca, su destino en el

interior del campo... En su destino anterior; el que quedaba a sus espaldas, a miles de verstas, en el callejón Spasopeskovski, cuelga y se balancea el precinto puesto por la policía. Entre la niebla se vislumbran las torres de vigilancia, los guardias enfundados en sus largas pellizas, las puertas abiertas. En ese instante Masha vio con claridad sus dos vidas: la que se había ido y la que venía.

Corre, tropieza, se sopla los dedos helados, y aquella insensata esperanza no la abandona: ahora llegarán al campo y le comunicarán que van a liberarla. Por eso ella corre de esa manera, se ahoga por las prisas.

¡Qué trabajo tan duro le habían dado! Cómo le punzaba el vientre, cómo le dolían los riñones bajo el peso desmesurado, excesivo para la fuerza de una mujer, de la piedra caliza que tiene que transportar; las alforjas, aun vacías, le parecían de plomo. Cómo pesaban las azadas, las palancas, las vigas, los depósitos de agua sucia, los barriles urinarios llenos de excrementos, las enormes montañas de ropa lavada aún húmeda.

Qué penoso era el camino en medio de la oscuridad y la niebla del crepúsculo hacia el puesto de trabajo; qué agotadores eran los controles en medio del fango y el frío intenso, qué repugnante y a la vez anhelado era el brebaje de maíz donde flotaban trozos de menudillos y asquerosas escamas de pescado que se pegaban al paladar; cómo robaban depravada y pérfidamente en los barracones, qué abyectas conversaciones se mantenían por la noche en los catres, qué abominables dimes y diretes, cuchicheos, susurros; qué constante era el deseo de aquel pan negro rancio, duro, mohoso.

Muja, una delincuente común que trabajaba en las calderas, convivía con una joven de dieciséis años, Lena Rudolf, que dormía al lado de Masha. Lena contrajo la sífilis, se le cayeron las uñas y se quedó calva. El servicio sanitario la transfirió a un campo para inválidos, pero su madre, la buena y servicial Siuzanna Kárlovna, que tenía una mirada luminosa y había conservado en el campo toda su elegancia, continuaba trabajando, aunque tenía todo el cabello blanco. Siuzanna Kárlovna hacía gimnasia antes del amanecer, se frotaba con la nieve.

Masha trabajaba hasta el anochecer como una yegua, una camella, una burra. El campo era de régimen especial, no tenía derecho a correspondencia, no sabía si su marido estaba vivo o lo habían ajusticiado, dónde estaba su Yulka, si había ido a parar a un orfanato, si se había perdido como un animalito sin nombre. Masha se preguntaba si acaso su madre habría dado con la pequeña, pero ni siquiera sabía si su madre estaba viva, si su hermano Volodia estaba vivo. Era como si se hubiese acostumbrado a no saber nada de los suyos, no parecía soñar ni

siquiera con una carta, deseaba sólo un trabajo más ligero, no estar expuesta al frío, no ir más a la taiga donde los insectos te devoran sino trabajar en la cocina, en la enfermería.

Pero la melancolía por el marido y la hija persistía y la esperanza no había muerto, sólo se lo parecía: la esperanza dormía. Y Masha sentía su sueño como se siente en los brazos a un niño dormido y, cuando la esperanza se despertaba, el corazón de la joven se llenaba de felicidad, de luz y de aflicción.

Volvería a ver a Yulia y a su marido. Hoy no, naturalmente, ni mañana. Pasarían los años, pero los volvería a ver: cómo has encanecido, qué ojos tan tristes tienes... ¡Yulenka, Yulenka! Aquella chica pálida y delgada era su hija. Y Masha se atormenta: ¿la reconocerá Yulia, se acordará de ella, de su madre del campo, no le dará la espalda?

El vigilante jefe, Semisotov, la había obligado a convertirse en su concubina, le había roto dos dientes, la había golpeado en la sien; eso había ocurrido en el primer otoño que pasó en el campo. Intentó ahorcarse pero no lo consiguió; la cuerda era de mala calidad. Algunas mujeres la envidiaban. Después le sobrevino una triste indiferencia; dos veces a la semana se arrastraba detrás de Semisotov hasta el almacén donde había unos tablones de madera cubiertos de piel de cordero. Semisotov siempre estaba sombrío, callado. Le daba tanto miedo que creía que iba a perder la cordura; incluso tenía conatos de vómito del miedo que le inspiraba cuando, borracho, se enfurecía. Pero una vez le dio cinco caramelos, y ella pensó: «Tendría que enviárselos a Yulia, al orfanato». Y no se los había comido, los había escondido debajo del colchón de paja. Después se los robaron. Una vez Semisotov le había dicho: «Está sucia, prostituta, ni siquiera una campesina se permitiría ir tan mugrienta». La trataba siempre de usted, incluso cuando estaba completamente borracho. Las palabras de Semisotov la alegraron y sin embargo pensó: «Si me echa, me tocará trabajar de nuevo en la piedra caliza».

Una tarde Semisotov se fue del campo y no volvió a aparecer. Más tarde supo que lo habían transferido a otro campo. Se alegró de poder quedarse por las tardes en el catre del barracón, de no tener que ir con la cabeza gacha hasta el almacén. Pero luego la echaron de la oficina donde, cuando estaba Semisotov, fregaba los suelos y encendía las estufas: de hecho, ya no había motivo para seguir consintiéndola y le dieron su puesto a una ladrona, la misma que en el convoy le había robado la chaqueta de lana. Se sintió alegre y ofendida al mismo tiempo: él se había ido sin decirle siquiera media palabra de despedida, la había tratado peor que a un perro. Y pensar que en otro tiempo había tenido un permiso de residencia permanente en Moscú, vivía en una habitación independiente junto con su marido y con Yulia, se lavaba en un baño, comía en un plato.

El trabajo en el campo durante los meses de invierno era muy duro, pero también durante la época estival era duro trabajar, y en los días de primavera y de otoño era igual de pesado; ahora ya no se acordaba de Arbat ni de Andréi, sino únicamente de que cuando Semisotov estaba ahí fregaba suelos en la oficina. Y se preguntaba si de verdad había tenido tanta suerte.

Y sin embargo la esperanza anidaba en su corazón: volvería a ver a su familia... Para entonces, naturalmente, sería vieja, tendría el cabello cano. Y Yulia tendría hijos, pero volverían a verse, no podían no verse de nuevo.

Entretanto su cabeza estaba llena de preocupaciones, temores, angustias. Ahora se le desgarraba la camisa, ahora tenía abscesos, ahora le dolía el vientre y no le daban permiso para ir al servicio sanitario, ahora se le rompía improvisadamente la piel de los talones, y cojeaba, y los peales se le oscurecían de manchas de sangre, ahora se le deshilacliaba una de sus válenki[25] ahora necesitaba a toda costa, sin esperar su turno para el baño, lavarse un poco al menos, hacer algo de colada, ahora necesitaba secar el chaquetón acolchado, empapado de lluvia... Y tenía que librar una batalla para conseguir cualquier cosa: un caldero de agua caliente, hilo para remendar, una aguja de alquiler, una cuchara con el mango entero, un retal para hacer un zurcido. ¿Cómo escapar de los mosquitos, cómo protegerse la cara y las manos del hielo, de aquel hielo tan despiadado como los guardias del campo?

Pero los altercados plagados de blasfemias, las riñas entre las reclusas no eran más fáciles de soportar que los trabajos del campo.

Y entretanto, la vida en los barracones continuaba.

La tía Tania, una mujer de Oriol que trabajaba como barrendera, susurra: «Desdichado aquel que vive sobre la Tierra...». Su cara tosca, de campesina, parece cruel, fanática. Pero en la tía Tania no hay crueldad ni fanatismo: sólo bondad. ¿Por qué había ido a parar al campo de reclusión aquella santa? Con qué dulzura incomprensible está dispuesta siempre a fregar el suelo en lugar de cualquier otra, a hacer turnos que no le tocan a ella.

Las viejas monjas, Várvara y Ksenia, hablan en un rápido bisbiseo, pero enmudecen en cuanto las pecadoras mundanas se acercan a ellas. Viven en un mundo aparte: firmar un papel es pecado, pronunciar sus nombres laicos es pecado, beber en el mismo vaso que ha utilizado gente profana es pecado, ponerse el capote corto guateado del campo, el bushlat, es pecado. Tan obstinadas son en su santidad que pueden matarlas, poco les importa. Su santidad es visible en sus ropas, en sus velos blancos, en sus labios fruncidos, pero en sus ojos hay frialdad y desprecio hacia los sufrimientos del campo, hacia el pecado. Para su santa

virginidad, las pasiones y las desgracias de las mujeres, los sufrimientos de las madres y las esposas son repugnantes: todo aquello les parece impuro. Lo principal es preservar la limpieza de los velos, de los vasos, mantenerse apartadas, con los labios fruncidos, de la pecaminosa vida del campo. Las ladronas las odiaban, las esposas les tenían poca simpatía, las evitaban.

Esposas, esposas de Moscú, de Leningrado, de Kiev, de Járkov, de Rostov; esposas tristes, prácticas, que no son de este mundo, pecadoras, débiles, dulces, malas, risueñas, rusas y no rusas, vestidas con los capotes del presidio. Mujeres de doctores, ingenieros, pintores y agrónomos, mujeres de mariscales y químicos, mujeres de fiscales y de granjeros deskulakizados, de agricultores rusos y bielorrusos. Todas han seguido a sus maridos en las tinieblas escíticas de aquellos túmulos funerarios llamados barracones.

Cuanto más famoso era el enemigo del pueblo caído en desgracia, más amplio era el círculo de mujeres que le seguían por el sendero del campo: la mujer, la ex mujer, la primerísima mujer, la hermana, la secretaria, la hija, la amiga de la mujer, la hija de su primer matrimonio.

De algunas decían: «Es extraordinariamente sencilla, modesta...», de otras: «Oh, es totalmente insoportable, altiva... Se cree una gran dama, como si estuviera en el Kremlin». Estas últimas contaban también allí con un séquito de serviles aduladoras. Las rodeaba una aureola de poder y de perdición irremediable. De ellas se decía en susurros: «No, éstas no saldrán vivas de aquí».

Había mujeres viejas de mirada cansada, tranquila, que habían sido arrestadas en tiempos de Lenin y contaban a sus espaldas con decenas de años de reclusión en el campo. Eran populistas, socialistas—revolucionarias, socialdemócratas. Los guardias les tenían estima, las ladronas las respetaban; no se levantaban de la litera ni cuando el jefe en persona entraba en el barracón. Se contaba que una de ellas, Olga Nikoláyevna, una viejecita con el pelo todo blanco, había sido anarquista antes de la Revolución. Había lanzado una bomba al carruaje del gobernador de Varsovia, había disparado contra un general. Y ahora ahí está, sentada sobre el tablón de la litera, leyendo un librito y bebiendo agua caliente de una jarra. Una vez que Masha había vuelto de noche del almacén de Semisotov, aquella viejecita se le había acercado, le había acariciado la cabeza y le había dicho: «Mi pobre niña». Ay, cómo había llorado entonces Masha.

No lejos de Masha yace en la litera Siuzanna Kárlovna Rudolf. Su marido, un profesor alemán americanizado, era un socialista cristiano que se había instalado con su familia en la Rusia soviética y había adoptado la ciudadanía del país. El profesor Rudolf había sido condenado a diez años sin derecho a correspondencia: fue fusilado en la Lubianka. Siuzanna Kárlovna y sus tres hijas,

Agnessa, Luiza y Lena, habían sido enviadas a campos de régimen especial. Siuzanna Kárlovna no sabía nada de sus hijas; ni siquiera la más pequeña, Lena, estaba ahora con ella: había sido transferida a un campo para inválidos. Siuzanna Kárlovna no saluda a Olga Nikoláyevna porque la vieja ha tildado a Stalin de fascista y a Lenin de asesino de la libertad rusa. Siuzanna Kárlovna dice que con su trabajo contribuye a edificar un mundo nuevo y eso es lo que le da fuerzas para soportar la separación de su marido y sus hijas. Siuzanna Kárlovna contaba que cuando vivían en Londres se habían hecho amigos de Herbert G. Wells, y que en Washington se habían encontrado con el presidente Roosevelt, al que le gustaba conversar con su marido. Ella lo acepta todo, todo está claro para ella, sólo una cosa le resulta incomprensible: había visto al hombre que fue a arrestar al profesor Rudolf meterse en el bolsillo una moneda grande de oro, una pieza de coleccionista, grande como la mano de un niño, con un valor de cien dólares. En aquella moneda aparecía el perfil de un indio adornado con un tocado de plumas. El hombre que había efectuado el registro había cogido la moneda para su hijo pequeño sin pararse a pensar siquiera que se trataba de una moneda de oro.

Todas aquellas mujeres —puras o corrompidas, extenuadas o resistentes— vivían en el mundo de la esperanza. Una esperanza que ahora se dormía, ahora se despertaba, pero que nunca las abandonaba.

Masha también esperaba, con una esperanza atormentadora. Pero era esa esperanza la que le permitía respirar, incluso cuando la atormentaba.

Después del riguroso invierno siberiano, largo como una condena que hay que purgar, había llegado una pálida primavera, y a Masha la enviaron, junto con otras dos mujeres, a desescombrar el camino que llevaba a la ciudad socialista, donde los jefes y el personal asalariado vivían en casitas de troncos.

De lejos le había parecido reconocer, en las ventanas altas, los visillos de cuando vivía en la calle Arbat y la silueta de un ficus. Veía a una niña con una cartera escolar subiendo los escalones del zaguán y entrar en la casa del jefe de administración de los campos de régimen especial.

El guardia que las escoltaba le había dicho: «Eh, tú, ¿has venido a ver cine?». Cuando después, a la luz del crepúsculo, regresaron al campo, cerca del almacén de la serrería oyeron la radio de Magadán.

Masha y las dos mujeres que se arrastraban a su lado sobre el barro dejaron las palas y se detuvieron.

Sobre el fondo del cielo descolorido se erguían torres de vigilancia donde los centinelas en pellizas cortas y negras se habían posado como enormes moscas, y los barracones chatos parecían haber brotado de la tierra y luego haber

reconsiderado si no era mejor quedarse allí debajo.

La música no era triste, era una música alegre, de baile, y Masha, al escucharla, lloraba como nunca antes había llorado en su vida. Sus dos compañeras, una vieja deskulakizada y una anciana mujer de Leningrado que llevaba unas gafas con los cristales rajados, también lloraban al lado de Masha. Y parecía que las grietas de las gafas fueran rastros dejados por las lágrimas.

El hombre que las escoltaba se quedó desconcertado: las reclusas lloraban en contadas ocasiones, sus corazones estaban atrapados en el hielo, como la tundra.

Con un empujón en la espalda, les pidió:

—Venga, basta ya, mujerzuelas. Andando, os lo pido por favor.

El hombre miraba a su alrededor; nunca se le hubiese ocurrido pensar que aquellas mujeres lloraban por la radio.

Ni siquiera la propia Masha comprendía por qué su corazón se había llenado tan repentinamente de melancolía y desesperación; como si todas las cosas que había conocido en la vida se hubiesen unido en un todo: el amor de su madre, el vestido de lana de cuadros que le quedaba tan bien, Andriusha, las poesías que amaba, la cara temible del juez instructor, el amanecer con el súbito centelleo del sol sobre el mar azul, en Kelasuri, cerca de Sujum, el balbuceo de Yulka, Semisotov, las monjas viejas, las peleas desenfrenadas de las mujeres-macho, la angustia que le provocaba el hecho de que la jefe de brigada, entornando los ojos, hubiera comenzado a mirarla fijamente, tal como la miraba Semisotov. ¿Por qué de repente al oír aquella alegre música de baile había comenzado a sentir la camisa sucia sobre el cuerpo, los zapatos pesados como planchas de hierro y el hedor ácido de su capote? ¿Por qué de improviso, rasgándole el corazón como una cuchilla de afeitar, le había asaltado esta pregunta: qué había hecho ella, Masha, para merecer aquel frío gélido, la depravación espiritual, la resignación paulatina a su destino de presidiaría?

La esperanza, aquel peso vivo que siempre le había oprimido el corazón, había muerto...

Bajo el alegre sonido de aquella música de baile Masha perdió para siempre la esperanza de volver a ver a Yulia, extraviada entre los orfanatos, las casas de acogida, las colonias y los hospicios de la inmensa Unión de Repúblicas Socialistas Soviéticas. Al ritmo del alegre sonido de aquella música bailaban los chicos en las residencias y en los clubes estudiantiles. Y Masha comprendió que su marido ya no se hallaba en ningún lado, que lo habían fusilado y que no volvería a verle nunca más.

La esperanza la había abandonado, se había quedado completamente sola... Nunca vería a Yulia, ni hoy ni de vieja con los cabellos canos, nunca.

Dios mío, Dios mío, ten piedad de ella, Señor; perdónala.

Un año después Masha abandonó el campo. Antes de recobrar la libertad, permaneció acostada en una cabaña helada, sobre una tarima de pino. Ya no la apremiaban para que fuese a trabajar. Nadie la maltrataba. Los camilleros depositaron a Masha Liubímova en una caja cuadrangular, hecha de tablas que el servicio de control técnico había desechado. Miraron por última vez su cara. Tenía una expresión de dulce éxtasis infantil, de confusión, la misma con la que había escuchado, al lado del almacén de la serrería, aquella música alegre, primero sintiendo alegría, luego comprendiendo que no había esperanza.

E Iván Grigórievich pensó que en los trabajos forzados de Kolimá no había igualdad entre el hombre y la mujer: a pesar de todo, el destino de los hombres era más fácil.

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IVÁN Grigórievich vio a su madre en un sueño. Caminaba por el margen de un camino y se echaba a un lado para dejar pasar una larga fila de tractores y camiones de descarga. Ella no veía a su hijo. Él le gritaba: «Mamá, mamá, mamá...», pero el pesado estruendo de los tractores ahogaba su voz.

No dudaba que en medio del bullicio del camino ella reconocería en el presidiario de cabello blanco a su hijo: sólo con que le oyera, sólo con que le viera un instante, pero ella no le oía, no le veía.

Desesperado, abrió los ojos. Inclinada sobre él había una mujer medio vestida: él había llamado a su madre en sueños, y la mujer se le había acercado.

Estaba a su lado. De repente, con todo su ser, sintió que era hermosa. Le había oído gritar en sueños y se le había acercado, sintiendo por él ternura y piedad. Los ojos de la mujer no lloraban, pero en ellos había visto algo más grande que las lágrimas de compasión: vio algo que nunca había visto en la mirada de la gente.

Era hermosa porque era buena. La cogió de la mano. Ella se acostó a su lado y él sintió su calor, sintió su tierno pecho, los hombros, el cabello. Le parecía sentir todo aquello no despierto sino en sueños: despierto, nunca había sido feliz.Toda ella era bondad, y él comprendía con cada milímetro de su cuerpo que la ternura, el calor, el susurro de aquella mujer eran hermosos porque su corazón estaba lleno de bondad hacia él, porque el amor es bondad.

La primera noche de amor...

No tienes ganas de recordarlo, es tan duro, pero al mismo tiempo no consigues olvidar. Es algo vivo que ahora se despierta, ahora se duerme. Es como un trozo de proyectil alojado en el corazón. No puedes desembarazarte de él. Cómo olvidar... Yo era ya una mujer adulta.

Querido mío, amé mucho a mi marido. Yo era bella y sin embargo era mala, no era buena. Tenía entonces veintidós años. No te habrías enamorado de mí entonces, aunque fuera bella... Lo sé, como mujer lo siento: para ti no soy sólo una con la que te has ido a la cama. En cuanto a mí —no te enfades—, te miro como si fueses Cristo. Ante ti siempre siento el deseo de confesarme, como ante Dios. Mi amado, querido mío, quiero contártelo, quiero recordar todo lo que pasó.

No, no había hambruna en el momento de la deskulakización. Sólo en ciertas zonas. El hambre llegó en 1932, dos años después de la deskulakización. Fregaba los suelos en el Comité ejecutivo regional y una amiga mía los fregaba en el Departamento de Agricultura, así que sabíamos un montón de cosas, te puedo contar todo lo que ocurrió. El contable me decía: «Deberías ser ministra». Es cierto, lo cazo todo al vuelo y tengo buena memoria.

La deskulakización comenzó en 1919, a finales de año, pero el viraje definitivo se produjo entre febrero y marzo de 1930.

Lo recuerdo bien: antes del arresto les aplicaron un impuesto. Lo pagaron. Para la primera vez les alcanzó; la segunda vez aquel que pudo vendió, con tal de pagar. Creían que si pagaban el Estado tendría piedad. Algunos sacrificaron el ganado, destilaron vodka del grano, y bebían, comían, porque en cualquier caso, decían, la vida para ellos se había acabado.

Quizá las cosas fueran distintas en otras regiones, pero en la nuestra fue así. Comenzaron arrestando sólo a los cabezas de familia. Sobre todo apresaban a aquellos que, bajo las órdenes de Denikin, habían prestado servicio en las unidades cosacas. Quien llevaba a cabo los arrestos era únicamente la GPU[26]; los activistas aquí no participaron. A los de la primera redada los fusilaron en bloque, ninguno de ellos quedó con vida. A los que arrestaron a finales de diciembre los retuvieron en las cárceles dos o tres meses y luego los deportaron a áreas de reasentamiento para kulaks. Cuando arrestaban al padre no tocaban a las familias, sólo hacían un inventario de sus bienes, que ahora ya no pertenecían a la familia: se les confiaban para que los guardaran.

La dirección regional trazaba el plan con el número de kulaks que debían eliminar en cada distrito, los distritos dividían esa cifra entre los diversos soviets rurales, y los soviets rurales confeccionaban las listas. Y conforme a esas listas los arrestaban. Pero ¿quién las preparaba? Una troika. Tres personas de dudosa reputación decidían quién debía vivir y quién morir. Muchas cosas entraban en juego, naturalmente: sobornos, historias de mujeres, viejas rencillas. Los pobres siempre acababan siendo acusados de kulaks mientras que los ricos compraban su libertad.

Ahora me doy cuenta de que la desgracia no consistía en que las listas fueran preparadas por embaucadores. Entre los activistas había más gente honesta que embaucadora; pero fueran unos u otros los que lo hicieran, el delito era siempre el mismo. Lo principal era que todas aquellas listas eran injustas, una fechoría; ¿acaso no era lo mismo poner un nombre que otro? Iván era inocente, pero también Piotr. ¿Quién fijó la cifra de víctimas para toda Rusia? ¿Quién estableció aquel plan para todo el campesinado? ¿Quién firmó?

Encarcelados ya los cabezas de familia, a principios de 1930 comenzaron a arrestar a las familias. Para esta empresa no bastó con la GPU, fueron movilizados los activistas, gente de los nuestros, que todos conocíamos; a éstos se les giró la cabeza: como aturdidos, víctimas de un embrujo, amenazaban a punta de cañón, llamaban a los niños de los kulaks «hijos de puta», les gritaban «¡sanguijuelas!», y aquellas sanguijuelas se quedaban sin una gota de sangre en las venas, pálidos como el papel. Los ojos de los activistas estaban vidriosos, como los de los gatos. Y sí, la mayoría de ellos eran de los nuestros. Un auténtico hechizo. Así, se persuadieron de que no podían tocar nada: las servilletas eran inmundas, ni hablar de sentarse a la mesa de un parásito, incluso los hijos de los kulaks les parecían abominables, y las niñas eran peores que los piojos. Miraban a aquellos campesinos como si fueran ganado, cerdos; para ellos todo lo relacionado con los kulaks era repulsivo: no tenían personalidad ni alma, apestaban, eran todos sifilíticos, y —lo más importante— eran enemigos del pueblo y explotaban el trabajo de otros. Los pobres, en cambio, los komsomoles y los milicianos eran todos como Chapáyev, unos héroes; pero si se miraba bien a aquellos activistas se veía que eran gente corriente, como los demás; muchos de ellos eran unos mocosos, y no faltaban los granujas.

Aquellas palabras también empezaron a surtir efecto en mí, que era una jovencita; en las asambleas y los cursos de instrucción especial nos hablaban de los kulaks. La radio, el cine, los escritores y el propio Stalin repetían lo mismo: los kulaks son parásitos, queman el grano, matan a los niños. Lo declaraban abiertamente: había que levantar la furia de las masas contra ellos, destruirlos a todos en cuanto clase, a esos malditos...

Y yo también comencé a caer en el hechizo; cada vez estaba más convencida de que todas las desgracias procedían de los kulaks y que, eliminándolos a todos de un plumazo, llegarían tiempos felices para los campesinos.Y ninguna piedad por ellos: no eran seres humanos, ni siquiera se sabía a qué raza pertenecían. Así que me hice activista. Entre los activistas había gente para todo: los que creían y odiaban a los parásitos y estaban de parte de los campesinos pobres, los que se aprovechaban de la situación para hacer negocio; pero los que más abundaban eran los que ejecutaban órdenes: tipos que habrían matado a sus propios padres con tal de cumplir las instrucciones. Y los más despreciables no eran los que creían que la exterminación de los kulaks conduciría a una vida feliz —las bestias feroces no son las más espantosas—, los más repugnantes eran los que hacían sus negocios vertiendo sangre, los que hablaban de conciencia a voz en cuello y entretanto ajustaban cuentas y se dedicaban al pillaje. Arruinaban vidas por interés, por una fruslería, un par de botas; y arruinar la vida de alguien era fácil: escribe contra él, sin firmar siquiera, escribe que tiene braceros trabajando para él y que posee tres

vacas, y ya tenéis un kulak. Veía todas esas cosas, me inquietaba, por supuesto, pero en el fondo no sufría: si en el koljós no hubiesen sacrificado el ganado según las reglas, me habría inquietado, naturalmente, mucho, pero no habría perdido el sueño.

... Pero ¿de verdad no te acuerdas de lo que me respondiste? Yo no olvidaré nunca tus palabras. Palabras luminosas como la luz del día. Te pregunté cómo habían podido, los alemanes, matar en las cámaras de gas a los niños judíos. ¿Cómo podían vivir después de eso? ¿Era posible que no fueran juzgados ni por Dios ni por los hombres? Y tú dijiste: «El castigo del verdugo es éste: no considera a su víctima un hombre y él mismo deja de ser un hombre; mata al hombre que hay en él, se convierte en su propio verdugo; la víctima, por mucho que la destruyan, continuará siendo un ser humano para toda la eternidad». ¿Te acuerdas?

Ahora comprendo por qué fui a trabajar de cocinera: no quería seguir siendo la presidenta del koljós. Pero ya te he hablado de eso otras veces.

Ahora, cuando recuerdo la deskulakización, lo veo todo de otra manera; el hechizo pasó y veo a los seres humanos. ¿Por qué me endurecí tanto? ¡Cuánto sufrió esa gente, cómo los trataron! Pero yo decía: no son seres humanos, son kulaks. Y recuerdo, recuerdo y pienso: ¿quién inventó esta palabra, kulaks? ¿Fue Lenin? Cuántos tormentos padecieron. Para matarlos, era preciso declarar: los kulaks no son seres humanos. Sí, igual que cuando los alemanes decían que los judíos no eran seres humanos. Lo mismo dijeron Lenin y Stalin: los kulaks no son seres humanos. Pero ¡es una mentira! ¡Hombres! ¡Eran hombres! Eso es lo que empecé a entender. ¡Todos eran hombres!

Y así, a principios de 1930, comenzaron a deskulakizar a las familias. La furia más grande se desató en febrero y marzo. Se instó a que no quedara un solo kulak en el distrito para la temporada de siembra y que la vida pudiese tomar un nuevo rumbo. Nosotros decíamos: «Será la primera primavera koljosiana».

De expulsarlos se encargaron, naturalmente, los activistas. Faltaban, sin embargo, instrucciones al respecto. El presidente de un koljós reunió tantos carros que luego no había pertenencias suficientes para llenarlos; los llamábamos kulaks, pero los carros partieron medio vacíos. De nuestro pueblo, en cambio, los obligaron a marcharse a pie. Todo lo que se llevaron consigo fueron cosas para dormir, algo de ropa. Había tanto fango que les arrancaba las botas de los pies. Daba pena verlos. Caminaban en fila, dándose la vuelta para echar un último vistazo a sus isbas, sintiendo todavía en el cuerpo el calor de las estufas. Cómo sufrían: en aquellas casas habían nacido, en aquellas casas habían dado a sus hijas en matrimonio. Los habían obligado a irse a toda prisa, dejando la estufa

encendida, con la sopa de col a medio hacer, sin poder acabar de beberse la leche; y las chimeneas todavía humeaban. Las mujeres lloran, pero tienen miedo de lamentarse en voz alta. Y a nosotros nos daba lo mismo. Teníamos una sola cosa en la cabeza: ser activistas. Los hostigábamos como si fueran una bandada de gansos. Detrás rodaba una carreta, sobre ella iba Pelagueya, la ciega, el viejo Dmitri Ivánovich, que hacía diez años que no ponía los pies fuera de su cabaña, y Marusia la Tonta, hija de un kulak, paralítica, que de niña había recibido una coz de caballo en la sien y desde entonces se había quedado atontada.

Entretanto, en el centro del distrito las prisiones están atestadas. Sí, y además ¿qué clase de cárcel es la del centro del distrito? Una jaula. Hacinada de gente: de cada pueblo llegaba una columna. El cine, el teatro, los clubes, las escuelas, todo estaba ocupado por detenidos. Pero los retenían poco tiempo. Los empujaban a la estación, y allí, en las vías muertas, los esperaban vagones vacíos de trenes de mercancías. Los empujaban bajo escolta de la GPU y la milicia, como si fuesen asesinos: abuelitos y abuelitas, mujeres con niños, pero padres no había: se los habían llevado a todos en invierno. Y la gente cuchicheaba: «Echan a los kulaks», como si fuesen lobos. Y algunos gritaban: «Malditos», y ellos se quedaban petrificados, no lloraban...

No vi con mis propios ojos cómo se los llevaban, pero me enteré por la gente, porque algunos de los nuestros se marcharon más allá de los Urales, a refugiarse a casa de kulaks, para salvarse del hambre; yo misma recibí la carta de una amiga; además algunos huyeron de las áreas de reasentamiento, hablé con dos de ellos...

Los transportaron en vagones de mercancías sellados, sus pertenencias viajaban aparte, consigo sólo llevaban comida, lo que podían coger con las manos. En una estación de tránsito, me escribía mi amiga, hicieron subir al tren a los padres. Aquel día, en los vagones de mercancías, hubo mucha alegría y muchas lágrimas... El viaje se prolongó más de un mes: las líneas ferroviarias estaban llenas de trenes cargados de campesinos procedentes de todos los rincones de Rusia. Yacían unos encima de otros, ni siquiera había catres en los vagones de ganado. Los enfermos morían durante el viaje, no llegaban a destino. Pero lo más importante es que les daban de comer en los nudos ferroviarios: un cubo de bodrio, doscientos gramos de pan por cabeza.Los escoltas eran militares. No eran malos, simplemente los consideraban ganado, me contó mi amiga.

Cómo estaban allí, me lo explicaron los que huyeron: las autoridades regionales los distribuyeron por la taiga. Donde había un pueblecito forestal, allí llenaban las isbas de no aptos para el trabajo, hacinados como en los vagones. Y donde no había ninguna aldea próxima descargaban a la gente directamente en la

nieve. Las personas débiles morían. Los que sí eran aptos para el trabajo comenzaban a abatir árboles, me dijo que ni siquiera se molestaban en arrancar de raíz los tocones. Hacían rodar los troncos y construían chozas, barracas; trabajaban sin concederse siquiera un momento de reposo, para que sus familias no muriesen congeladas, después comenzaron a construir isbas pequeñas: dos habitaciones pequeñas, una para cada familia. Las construían sobre el musgo, utilizándolo como masilla.

Las explotaciones forestales compraban a los campesinos aptos para el trabajo. Les aseguraban aprovisionamiento y todas las personas a su cargo disfrutaban de rancho. Las llamaban «colonias de trabajo», y contaban con su comandante y sus capataces. Dicen que les pagaban lo mismo que a los obreros locales, pero no se les entregaba el salario, se lo guardaban en cuentas especiales. Es un gran pueblo, el nuestro: pronto comenzaron a ganar más que los lugareños. No tenían derecho a traspasar ciertos límites: alejarse de la colonia o abandonar la tala. Oí decir que más tarde, durante la guerra, se les concedió permiso para moverse dentro de los límites del distrito y, después de la guerra, a los héroes del trabajo incluso los autorizaron a salir del distrito: a algunos les dieron el pasaporte.

Después mi amiga me escribió que habían formado colonias para kulaks no aptos para el trabajo que debían autoabastecerse. Les habían dado en préstamo las semillas, y hasta la primera cosecha el NKVD les proporcionó rancho. Allí también había un comandante y guardias de escolta, como en las colonias de trabajo. Más tarde los transformaron en arteles, y allí, además del comandante, tenían jefes que ellos mismos elegían.

Entretanto, en nuestra aldea, se inició una nueva vida sin los kulaks. Comenzaron a enviar a todos al koljós: reuniones hasta la mañana, gritos, blasfemias. Unos gritaban: «¡No iremos!». Otros: «De acuerdo, pero las vacas no os las damos». Luego apareció el artículo de Stalin «El vértigo del éxito». De nuevo la confusión. Gritaban: «Stalin no ha ordenado que nos hagan entrar en los koljoses por la fuerza». Empezaron a escribir declaraciones en los márgenes de periódicos: dejo el koljós, vuelvo a la explotación individual. Pero de nuevo los obligaron a entrar en los koljoses. Por cierto, la mayor parte de los efectos personales que los kulaks expropiados habían dejado atrás habían sido robados.

Pensábamos que no había un destino peor que el de los kulaks. ¡Nos equivocamos! El hacha se abatió sobre todos los de aquel pueblo, desde el más pequeño hasta el más grande.

Llegó el castigo de la hambruna.Yo entonces ya no fregaba suelos, trabajaba como contable. Me habían mandado a Ucrania, como activista, para reforzar un koljós. Nos habían explicado que allí el espíritu de la propiedad privada era más

fuerte que en la RSFSR. Y lo cierto es que las cosas les iban bastante peor que a nosotros. Me mandaron bastante cerca, a menos de tres horas de viaje, porque nuestro pueblo está en la frontera con Ucrania. Era un lugar precioso. Llegué allí: eran gente normal y corriente. Y tomé las riendas de su contabilidad.

Creo que entendí bien la situación. No por nada, parece ser, el viejo me llamaba «ministra». Esto sólo te lo digo a ti porque cuando hablo contigo es como si hablara conmigo misma; delante de un extraño nunca me jactaría. Tenía toda la contabilidad en la cabeza, no necesitaba papeles. Y en el curso de las instrucciones, en las reuniones de nuestra troika y cuando los dirigentes bebían vodka, yo escuchaba todo cuanto se decía.

¿Qué había pasado? Después de la deskulakización la superficie de tierra cultivada disminuyó considerablemente y el rendimiento bajó. Según los informes, en cambio, parecía que sin kulaks nuestra vida había florecido de golpe. El soviet rural mentía al distrito, el distrito a la región, la región a Moscú. Aparentemente todo estaba en orden: Moscú fijaba unas cuotas de producción a las regiones, las regiones a los distritos. Y a nosotros, a nuestro pueblo, nos fijaron una cuota que ni siquiera en diez años habríamos podido cumplir. En el soviet rural incluso los que no bebían se dieron a la bebida para apaciguar el miedo. Se veía que Moscú tenía todas sus esperanzas puestas en Ucrania. Y fue sobre todo contra Ucrania contra la que más tarde se desencadenaría su ira. El discurso es de sobras conocido: tú no has cumplido el plan, tú eres un kulak encubierto.

Naturalmente, no se pudieron efectuar las entregas requeridas: la superficie cultivada había disminuido, el rendimiento había caído, ¿adonde iban a ir a buscarlo, ese mar de grano koljosiano? ¡Así que lo habían escondido! Eran unos kulaks encubiertos, unos holgazanes. Sí, los kulaks habían sido eliminados, pero su espíritu permanecía. En la cabeza de los ucranianos aún seguía imperando la propiedad privada.

¿Quién firmó aquel asesinato en masa? A menudo pienso: ¿no sería Stalin? Una orden así no se había dado nunca desde que existe Rusia. Una orden así no la había firmado nunca el zar, ni los tártaros, ni los ocupantes alemanes. Una orden que decía: matar de hambre a los campesinos de Ucrania, del Don, de Kubán, matarlos a ellos y a sus hijos. Se dio también la orden de requisar todo el fondo de semillas. Buscaban por todas partes el grano, como si no se tratase de trigo sino de bombas o ametralladoras. Hacían agujeros en la tierra con las bayonetas y las baquetas de los fusiles, registraron los sótanos, escarbaron en el suelo y revolvieron los huertos. A algunos les confiscaron el grano que tenían en casa, dentro de una olla o de una tina. A una mujer le quitaron el pan que había cocido, lo cargaron en el carro y lo llevaron también al distrito. Los carros chirriaban día y noche,

levantando polvareda a su paso. Como no había depósitos de cereales, descargaban el grano en el suelo, mientras los centinelas montaban guardia alrededor. Las lluvias de otoño remojaron el grano y cuando llegó el invierno casi todo estaba podrido: el poder soviético no tenía suficientes lonas impermeabilizadas para proteger el grano de los campesinos.

Entretanto se seguía transportando el grano de los pueblos, y una extensa polvareda se levantaba alrededor; todo estaba cubierto por una espesa niebla: el pueblo, el campo y, de noche, la luna. Uno se volvió loco: «¡Arde, el cielo arde, la tierra arde!». No, no era el cielo el que ardía, ardía la vida.

Entonces lo comprendí: para el poder soviético lo primero de todo era el plan. ¡Cumple el plan! ¡Entrega la cuota fijada, la provisión! En primer lugar, el Estado. La gente: un cero multiplicado por cero.

Padres y madres, en un desesperado intento por salvar la vida de sus hijos, escondieron pequeñas cantidades de grano, pero les decían: «Vosotros tenéis un odio feroz hacia el país del socialismo, queréis que el plan fracase, parásitos, secuaces de los kulaks, canallas». No queremos que fracase el plan, queremos salvar a nuestros hijos, queremos salvarnos a nosotros mismos. La gente necesita comer.

Puedo contarlo todo, pero en el relato son palabras, mientras que allí era vida, sufrimiento, muertes por hambre. Entre otras cosas, en el momento de requisar el grano explicaban a los activistas que se alimentaría a la gente con las reservas. Era mentira. Ni un solo grano se dio a los hambrientos.

¿Quién confiscaba el grano? La mayoría eran de los nuestros, del Comité ejecutivo del distrito o del Partido, los komsomoles, nuestros chicos, los jóvenes, y naturalmente la milicia, el NKVD, en algunas partes incluso los militares, yo vi a uno de Moscú, un movilizado, pero no es que se esforzara demasiado, lo intentaba todo para irse... Y de nuevo, como durante la deskulakización, la gente parecía haber perdido el juicio, se transformaron en bestias salvajes.

Grisha Sayenko era un policía que se había casado con una chica del pueblo y los días de fiesta venía a divertirse: era un tipo alegre, bailaba bien el tango y el vals, y cantaba canciones ucranianas populares. Un día se le acercó un abuelito con los cabellos completamente blancos y se puso a decirle: «Grisha, nos estáis hundiendo en la miseria, es peor que un asesinato. ¿Por qué el poder de los obreros y los campesinos trata así a los campesinos, como no lo hacía ni el zar?». Grisha le dio un empujón, luego fue al pozo, a lavarse las manos; dijo a la gente: «¿Cómo voy a coger la cuchara después de haber tocado el hocico de ese parásito?».

Y todo aquel polvo; noche y día, siempre polvo, mientras transportaban el

grano. La luna era una piedra suspendida en el cielo, y bajo aquella luna todo tenía un aspecto salvaje; de noche el calor era tan intenso como debajo de una piel de oveja, y el campo, tantas veces atravesado, presentaba un aspecto espeluznante, como una sentencia de muerte.

Y la gente no sabía qué hacer, y el ganado se había vuelto fiero, se asustaba, mugía, se lamentaba, y los perros aullaban con fuerza durante la noche. La tierra se agrietaba.

Y bien, luego llegó el otoño, las lluvias, y luego un invierno nevoso. Y nada de pan.

En el centro del distrito no se podía comprar pan debido al sistema de cartillas de racionamiento. Tampoco en las estaciones se podía comprar, ni en los quioscos, porque habían puesto militares de guardia y no dejaban que nadie se acercara. Ni siquiera se encontraba en el mercado negro.

Desde otoño la gente se alimentó a base de patatas, pero sin pan pronto se acabaron. Para Navidad se empezó a sacrificar el ganado. Pero aquella carne era toda piel y huesos. A las gallinas ya las habían matado antes, naturalmente. La carne tardó poco en agotarse, no quedaba ni una gota de leche, en todo el pueblo no se encontraba un solo huevo. Y lo que era peor, nada de pan. En el pueblo habían requisado todo el grano. Ni siquiera había semilla para plantar en primavera: habían confiscado hasta el último grano de reserva. Todas las esperanzas estaban puestas en los cereales de invierno. Pero todavía se encontraban bajo la nieve, la primavera quedaba lejos, y el pueblo había sucumbido a la hambruna. Se habían comido toda la carne, todo el mijo, y también las patatas; en las familias numerosas ya se había agotado prácticamente todo.

El terror les atenazó. Las madres miraban a los hijos y comenzaban a gritar de miedo. Gritaban como si les hubiese entrado una serpiente en casa. Y aquella serpiente es la muerte, el hambre. ¿Qué hacer? Los campesinos no pensaban en otra cosa: comer. Salivan, contraen la mandíbula y tragan, pero la saliva no sacia. Si por la noche te despertabas, todo alrededor estaba sumido en el silencio, ni una conversación, ni una armónica. Como en una tumba. Sólo el hambre ronda por las calles, no duerme. Los niños, en las cabañas, lloran desde la mañana: piden pan. Y la madre, ¿qué puede darles? ¿Nieve? Y nadie corre en su ayuda. De los miembros del Partido sólo obtienen una respuesta: «Deberían haber trabajado, no quedarse con los brazos cruzados». O bien: «Buscad en vuestras casas, en vuestro pueblo habéis enterrado grano para tres años».

Pero en invierno no había todavía verdadera hambre. Se sentían débiles, claro, las barrigas se les hincharon de comer mondas de patatas, pero no llegaron a

tener edemas. Comenzaron a extraer de debajo de la nieve las bellotas, las secaron, el molinero preparó la muela e hizo harina de bellota. Con aquella harina elaboraban pan o, para ser más exactos, galletas. Eran muy oscuras, más oscuras que el pan de centeno. Algunos añadían salvado, otros mondas de patatas trituradas. Las bellotas pronto se acabaron: el bosque de robles era pequeño, y tres pueblos se habían lanzado allí a la vez. De la ciudad llegó un delegado de) Partido, se dirigió al soviet rural y dijo: «¡Mírenlos, a esos parásitos! En lugar de trabajar siguen desenterrando bellotas con las manos desnudas».

Los alumnos de los cursos superiores fueron a la escuela hasta la primavera, pero los más pequeños dejaron de acudir en invierno. En primavera la escuela cerró sus puertas: la maestra se había ido a la ciudad. La enfermera también se marchó del puesto de asistencia médica: no teman nada para comer. Y además, el hambre no se cura con medicinas. El pueblo se quedó solo, en derredor el desierto, y en las isbas gente hambrienta. También dejaron de venir varios representantes desde la ciudad. ¿Para qué iban a venir? No había nada que arrebatar a los hambrientos, por tanto no hacía falta ir allí. Tampoco valía la pena proveerles de asistencia médica ni de educación. Cuando el Estado no puede sacar nada de una persona, ésta se convierte en algo inútil. ¿Para qué instruirlos? ¿Para qué curarlos?

Los hambrientos se quedaron solos; el Estado los había abandonado. La gente comenzó a vagar de pueblo en pueblo, cada uno pidiendo limosna al otro, los pobres a los pobres, los hambrientos a los hambrientos. Los que tenían menos hijos o estaban solos habían guardado algo para la primavera; y los que tenían muchos hijos iban adonde ellos, a pedir. Y algunas veces recibían un puñado de salvado y dos patatas. Los del Partido, en cambio, no daban nada, no por codicia o maldad sino porque tenían miedo. El Estado no dio ni un grano de trigo a los que se morían de hambre; ¡y pensar que éste se sostenía con el trigo de los campesinos! ¿Estaba al corriente Stalin de esto? Los ancianos recordaban la hambruna que se había producido en tiempos del zar Nicolás. Aun entonces se ayudaban entre ellos, se concedían préstamos; los campesinos iban a las ciudades a pedir limosna en nombre de Cristo, se organizaban comedores, los estudiantes hacían colectas. Pero bajo el Estado de los obreros y los campesinos no se daba ni un grano. Las carreteras estaban bloqueadas por las tropas, la milicia y el NKVD: a los hambrientos procedentes del campo no los dejan entrar, no pueden acercarse a la ciudad, las estaciones están rodeadas de guardias, incluso los apeaderos más pequeños. ¡No hay pan para vosotros, que alimentáis la nación! Sin embargo, en la ciudad, con la cartilla del pan, a los obreros les daban ochocientos gramos por cabeza. Dios mío, ¿es posible imaginar tanto pan? ¡Ochocientos gramos! Y para los niños del campo ni siquiera un gramo. Igual que los alemanes, que ahogaban a los niños judíos con gas: no tenéis derecho a vivir, sois judíos. Pero ¿aquí? No se

comprende: soviéticos contra soviéticos, rusos contra rusos; y el poder es de los obreros y los campesinos. ¿Por qué este exterminio?

Cuando la nieve empezó a derretirse, el pueblo se encontró sumido hasta el cuello en la hambruna.

Los niños gritan, no duermen: también de noche piden pan. La gente tiene la cara terrosa, los ojos turbios, ebrios. Caminan como sonámbulos, tanteando el suelo con los pies, con la mano se apoyan en la pared. El hambre los hace tambalearse. La gente empieza a caminar menos, a quedarse más tiempo tumbada. Y todo el tiempo tienen la impresión de oír el chirrido de un tren: es Stalin, que desde el centro del distrito envía harina para salvar a los niños.

Las mujeres se revelaron más fuertes que los hombres, se aferraban a la vida con más rabia. Y a ellas les tocaba la peor parte: es a las madres a quien los niños piden comida. Algunas madres intentaban hacer entrar en razón a sus hijos, les besaban: «Venga, no gritéis, resistid, ¿dónde queréis que encuentre pan?». Otras se ponían hechas unas furias: «¡No gimotees o te mato!», y les pegaban con lo primero que encontraban a mano para que dejasen de pedir. Y otras, aun, huían de casa, se escondían donde los vecinos para no oír los gritos de sus hijos.

Para entonces tampoco quedaban gatos ni perros: los habían matado. Y eso que cazarlos era difícil: los animales tenían miedo de las personas, cuyos ojos se habían vuelto salvajes. La gente los cocinó, pero eran sólo tendones resecos. Con las cabezas hacían gelatina.

La nieve se había derretido ya cuando la gente comenzó a hincharse; les había sobrevenido el edema del hambre: rostros inflados, piernas como cojines, agua en el vientre, se orinaban todo el rato encima, no les daba tiempo a salir para hacerlo fuera. ¡Y sus hijos! ¿Has visto en los periódicos los niños en los campos alemanes? Idénticos: cabezas pesadas como balas de cañón, cuellos delgados de cigüeña, en las manos y en los pies se veía cómo se les movía cada huesecito por debajo de la piel, esqueletos envueltos en piel, una gasa amarilla. Niños con caras envejecidas, atormentadas, como si llevaran en el mundo setenta años, y hacia la primavera no tenían ni siquiera cara, más bien la cabecita de un pájaro con su piquito, o el hocico de una rana, con esos labios largos y finos; otros parecían gobios, con la boca abierta. No eran caras humanas. Y los ojos, ¡oh, Señor! Camarada Stalin, Dios mío, ¿ha visto alguna vez esos ojos? Tal vez no lo supiera, después de todo fue él quien escribió el artículo «El vértigo del éxito».

Qué no se llevaban a la boca: cazaban ratones, ratas, víboras, gorriones, hormigas, lombrices, comenzaron a moler los huesos para hacer harina, a triturar la piel, las suelas, las viejas pellizas pestilentes para hacer una pasta, cocían la cola.

Cuando creció el pasto se pusieron a desenterrar las raíces, a hervir las hojas y los brotes; prácticamente todo era bueno para hacer un caldo: dientes de león, bardanas, campanillas, epilobios, angélica menor, cardillos, ortigas, uvas de gato... Secaron las hojas de tilo e hicieron harina, pero teníamos pocos tilos. Las galletas de tilo son verdes, mucho peor que las de bellotas.

¡Y nada de ayuda! Además, por entonces ya ni se pedía. Aún ahora, cuando me paro a pensarlo, siento que se me va la cabeza: ¿es posible que Stalin repudiara a toda esa gente? ¿Que se cometiera ese asesinato tan horrendo? El hecho es que Stalin tenía grano. Por tanto condenó a esa gente a morir de hambre porque así lo quiso. No quisieron socorrer a los niños. ¿Era Stalin peor que Herodes? Me pregunto si es posible que hayan sustraído el pan y el grano para matar deliberadamente de hambre a la gente. No, algo así no pudo ser. Pero luego pienso: ¡así fue, así fue! Y enseguida: no, no puede ser...

¿Por dónde iba? Ah, sí. Antes de perder todas las fuerzas, cruzaban los campos a pie hasta la vía del tren, no hasta la estación, allí había guardias que no permitían acercarse, sino directamente a las vías del tren. Y cuando pasaba el expreso Kiev—Odesa se hincaban de rodillas y gritaban: «¡Pan, pan!». Algunos aupaban a sus espantosos hijos. Y a veces los pasajeros lanzaban trozos de pan, sobras varias. Pasado el estrépito del tren, la polvareda se estacionaba y el pueblo entero se arrastraba a lo largo de la vía en busca de un mendrugo de pan. Pero después se emitió una orden: cuando el tren pasaba a través de las regiones asoladas por el hambre, los guardias debían cerrar las ventanillas y correr las cortinas. No permitían a los viajeros que se acercaran a los cristales. Por lo demás, los campesinos habían dejado de ir, ya no tenían fuerzas no sólo para ir hasta las vías del tren, sino para arrastrarse fuera de casa.

Recuerdo a un viejo que llevó al presidente del koljós un trozo de periódico; lo había recogido en las vías. Allí sé leía una noticia breve: había venido de visita un francés, un famoso ministro, y lo habían llevado a la región de Dniepropetrovsk, donde causaba estragos una hambruna peor aún que la nuestra: allí se comían los unos a los otros. Así, llevaron al ministro a un pueblo, al pequeño jardín de infancia del koljós, y él les preguntó: «¿Qué os han dado hoy para comer?». Y los niños respondieron: «Caldo de pollo, empanadillas de carne y croquetas de arroz». Yo misma lo leí. Lo veo como si fuese ahora mismo, ese recorte de periódico. Pero ¿qué era eso? Estaban matando a escondidas a millones de personas y engañaban al mundo entero. ¡Caldo de pollo, escriben! ¡Croquetas! Y se habían comido hasta la última lombriz. Y el viejo le dijo al presidente: «En tiempos del zar Nicolás, los periódicos hablaban de la hambruna al mundo entero:

"¡Ayudadnos, los campesinos se mueren!". Y vosotros, monstruos, haciendo teatro».

El pueblo gemía al ser testigo de su propia muerte. Todos gemían, no con el pensamiento, no con el alma, sino como las hojas que susurran al viento o la paja que cruje. Y entonces estallé de rabia: ¿por qué gimen tan lastimosamente? Ya no son hombres, y sin embargo emiten aquel grito lastimoso. Hay que tener el corazón de piedra para comer una ración de pan escuchando aquel aullido. A veces me voy al campo con mi ración, aguzo el oído: gimen. Me alejo un poco más, y ahí, ahí parece que no se oye nada; sigo avanzando, y de nuevo los oigo: es el pueblo vecino el que gime. Parece que toda la tierra gima junto con la gente. Pero si Dios no existe, ¿quién les escuchará?

Uno del NKVD me dijo un día: «¿Sabes cómo llaman a vuestros pueblos en la región? El cementerio de la escuela rigurosa». Al principio no comprendí aquellas palabras.

¡Y qué buen tiempo hacía! A principios de verano habíamos tenido lluvias, de esas impetuosas y repentinas, que se alternaban con un sol ardiente, por lo que el trigo se alzaba exuberante como una pared; se necesitaba un hacha para cortarlo, y su altura superaba la estatura de un hombre. Cuántos arco iris vi aquel verano, y tormentas, y lluvias tibias; cíngaras, las llaman.

Durante el invierno todos habían hecho conjeturas: ¿tendremos cosecha? Preguntaban a los ancianos, se ponían ejemplos, todas las esperanzas estaban puestas en el trigo de invierno. Las esperanzas tuvieron su recompensa, pero ya no pudieron segarlo. Entré en una isba: algunos respiraban a duras penas, otros ya no; gente tumbada, algunos sobre las camas, otros sobre la estufa[27]; y la hija del dueño, a la que conocía, estaba tirada en el suelo en una especie de delirio, royendo con los dientes un taburete. Y lo más espantoso es que al oír que yo entraba no se giró sino que gruñó como hacen los perros si te acercas mientras roen huesos.

La hambruna era absoluta, la muerte se abatió sobre el pueblo. Primero niños y ancianos, luego personas de mediana edad. Al principio los enterraban, después dejaron de hacerlo. Había cadáveres por todas partes, en las calles, en los patios; los que murieron los últimos se quedaron acostados en sus isbas. Se hizo el silencio. Todo el pueblo murió. No sé quién fue el último. A nosotros, los que trabajábamos en la dirección del koljós, nos devolvieron a la ciudad.

Primero fui a parar a Kiev. En aquellos días se comenzó a vender pan en el mercado libre. ¡Ni hecho a propósito! La noche antes se formaban ya colas de medio kilómetro. Como sabes, hay muchos tipos de colas: en unas, la gente espera

su turno, ríe y come pipas de girasol; en otras, te dan un trozo de papel con un número; en unas terceras, donde nadie bromea, te escriben el número en la palma de la mano o en la espalda, con una tiza. Allí, sin embargo, eran especiales: colas así no las había visto en mi vida. Se cogían de la cintura y permanecían así, unos detrás de los otros. Si alguien daba un traspiés, toda la cola se tambaleaba, como si una ola les pasara por debajo. Parecía que estuviera a punto de comenzar un baile: un paso aquí, otro más allá. Y cada vez se tambalean más. Tienen miedo de que les fallen las fuerzas y no puedan mantenerse agarrados al de delante, y que las manos se suelten; por ese miedo, las mujeres comienzan a gemir, y así toda la fila solloza. Parece que se hayan vueltos locos, por eso cantan y bailan. A veces la chusma irrumpe en la cola después de haber observado cuál es el punto débil por donde se puede romper fácilmente. Cuando la chusma se acerca, todos comienzan a gemir de nuevo, de miedo; parece que estén cantando. En la cola para comprar pan en el mercado libre se encuentra la gente de ciudad: los privados de derechos, sin pasaporte, artesanos o gente de la periferia.

Del campo llegan arrastrándose los campesinos. Las estaciones están acordonadas, se inspeccionan todos los trenes. En las carreteras hay controles de militares por doquier, el NKVD; pero los campesinos siguen llegando a Kiev: se arrastran por prados, tierras vírgenes, pantanos y bosques para evitar los controles en las carreteras. No se pueden poner puertas al campo. Ahora ya no pueden caminar, únicamente pueden arrastrarse. La gente de la ciudad tiene prisa, va a la suya: unos van al trabajo, otros al cine, los tranvías circulan, y los hambrientos se arrastran entre la gente: niños, hombres, chicas; ni siquiera parecen seres humanos, se diría que son una especie de gatos o perros repulsivos, a cuatro patas. Y aún quieren comportarse como seres humanos, aún tienen vergüenza. Una chica hinchada se arrastra, parece un mono: gañe, pero se endereza la falda, se avergüenza, se esconde el cabello bajo el pañuelo. Es una campesina que ha ido a Kiev por primera vez. Pero sólo los afortunados han logrado arrastrarse hasta allí, uno entre diez mil. Y aun así no hay salvación para ellos: yacen hambrientos en el suelo, piden con un susurro, pero no pueden comer, tienen un mendrugo de pan al lado, pero ya no lo ven, están a un paso de la muerte.

Por la mañana, los carros de plataforma, tirados por caballos, recogían a los que habían muerto durante la noche. Vi uno de esos carros donde estaban amontonados los niños. Tal como te los había descrito: delgaditos y larguiruchos, con carita de pájaros muertos, picos puntiagudos. Hasta Kiev han volado aquellos pajarillos, ¿para qué? Entre ellos había alguno que aún gimotea; las cabecitas, como llenas de líquido, se bambolean. Le pregunté al cochero, hizo un gesto desdeñoso con la mano y dijo: «Antes de que llegue a destino, se callarán para siempre».

Vi a una chica cruzar la acera arrastrándose; un portero le dio una patada y

ella rodó hasta la calzada. Ni siquiera miró atrás, se alejó a rastras rápidamente, afanosa, aunque ya no le quedaban fuerzas, y aun así se sacudió el vestido cubierto de polvo, imagínatelo. Aquella mañana había comprado un periódico de Moscú, leí un artículo de Maksim Gorki; decía que los niños necesitan juguetes culturales. ¿Es posible que Maksim Gorki no estuviese al corriente de aquellos niños que los caballos de tiro llevaban a descargar? O tal vez lo sabía y también se callaba, como hacían todos. Y escribía de la misma manera que los que escribían que aquellos niños muertos comían caldo de pollo. El cochero me dijo que donde había más muertos era al lado de los puntos de venta de pan: basta con que uno de esos pobres hinchados mastique un trozo de pan, y se acabó. Se me ha quedado grabado en la memoria aquel Kiev, aunque sólo pasé tres días allí.

Esto es lo que he comprendido. Al principio el hambre te echa de casa. Primero es un fuego que te quema, te atormenta, te desgarra las tripas y el alma: el hombre huye de casa. La gente desentierra lombrices, arranca hierba; ya lo ves, incluso se abrieron paso hasta Kiev. Y todos se van de casa, todos. Luego llega el día en que el hambriento vuelve atrás, se arrastra hasta casa. Esto significa que el hambre le ha vencido, aquel hombre ya no se salvará, se mete en la cama y permanece tumbado. Una vez que el hambre lo ha vencido, el hombre ya no se levantará, no sólo porque ya no tenga fuerzas: le falta interés, ya no quiere vivir. Se queda tumbado en silencio y no quiere que nadie lo toque. El hambriento no quiere comer, orina todo el rato, tiene diarrea; está somnoliento, no quiere que le molesten: quiere que le dejen en paz. Así, acostado, agoniza. Lo mismo explicaban los prisioneros de guerra: si uno de ellos se echaba a dormir y no extendía la mano para coger la ración de comida era que su final estaba próximo. Pero algunos campesinos habían enloquecido, sólo hallaban paz en la muerte. Se les reconocía por los ojos, brillantes. Éstos eran los que troceaban los cadáveres y los hervían, mataban a sus propios hijos y se los comían. En ellos se despertaba la bestia cuando el hombre moría en ellos. Vi a una mujer, la habían traído bajo escolta al centro del distrito. Su cara era la de un ser humano, pero tenía los ojos de un lobo. Dicen que a éstos, los caníbales, los fusilaron. Pero ellos no eran culpables; culpables eran los que llevaron a una madre hasta el extremo de comerse a sus hijos. Pero ¿crees que se puede encontrar al culpable? Ve y pregunta... Es por hacer el bien, el bien de la humanidad, que llevaron a las madres hasta ese punto.

Entonces lo comprendí: todos los hambrientos son, en cierto sentido, caníbales. Consumen su propia carne, sólo les quedan huesos, devoran su grasa hasta el último gramo. Luego se les enturbia la razón: también se han comido el cerebro. Se han devorado por completo.

Pensaba además que cada hambriento muere a su manera. En una cabaña están en guerra, se vigilan los unos a los otros, se arrebatan las migas. La mujer se

vuelve contra el marido, el marido contra la mujer. La madre odia a los hijos. Pero en otras casas el amor es inquebrantable. Conocí a una mujer, tenía cuatro hijos. Les contaba cuentos para que se olvidaran del hambre, aunque apenas podía mover la lengua; los cogía en brazos, aunque no tenía fuerzas para levantarlos. Y es que el amor vivía en ella. La gente se dio cuenta de que allí donde vencía el odio, morían más rápidamente. Aunque el amor tampoco salvó ninguna vida. El pueblo entero murió. La vida desapareció.

Me enteré más tarde de que en nuestro pueblo se hizo el silencio. Ya no se oía a los niños. No necesitaban ni juguetes culturales ni caldos de pollo. Ya no gemían. Nadie. Supe que enviaron a tropas para segar el trigo. Sin embargo, a los soldados del Ejército Rojo no les permitieron entrar en el pueblo, estaban acantonados en tiendas de campaña. Les explicaron que había habido una epidemia. Pero se quejaban de que del pueblo llegaba un hedor horrible. Los militares también sembraron el trigo de invierno. Y al año siguiente trajeron a nuevos colonos de la provincia de Oriol. Sabes, la tierra ucraniana es tierra negra, mientras que en Oriol siempre hay malas cosechas. A las mujeres y a los niños los dejaban en unas barracas cerca de la estación mientras que a los hombres los llevaron al pueblo. Les dieron horcas y les ordenaron entrar en las cabañas a retirar los cadáveres: los muertos, hombres y mujeres, yacían algunos por el suelo, otros en las camas. El hedor en las isbas era espantoso. Tapándose la nariz y la boca con pañuelos, los hombres comenzaban a sacar los cuerpos; pero se deshacían en trozos. Luego enterraron los restos fuera del pueblo. Fue entonces cuando comprendí qué era eso del «cementerio de la escuela rigurosa». Cuando retiraron todos los cadáveres de las isbas, llevaron a las mujeres para que fregaran los suelos y encalaran las paredes. Lo hicieron todo como es debido, pero el hedor no se iba. Dieron una segunda mano de cal y rebozaron los suelos con arcilla, pero el hedor persistía. En aquellas cabañas no pudieron comer ni dormir, se volvieron a Oriol. Pero las tierras no quedaron abandonadas, naturalmente: eran tierras muy ricas.

Fue como si no hubiesen vivido. Pero habían pasado muchas cosas. Amor, mujeres que abandonaron a sus maridos, hijas entregadas en matrimonio, peleas entre borrachos, visitas de amigos, pan recién horneado. Cuánto trabajo y cuántas canciones habían cantado. Y los niños iban a la escuela... Y el cinematógrafo ambulante llegaba al pueblo; también los más viejos iban a ver las películas.

Ya nada de eso queda. ¿Dónde fue a parar esa vida? ¿Dónde están aquellos sufrimientos horribles? ¿Es posible que no haya quedado nada? ¿Es posible que nadie responda por todo aquello? ¿Que todo se olvide, sin una palabra? La hierba lo cubrirá todo.

Ahora te hago una pregunta: ¿cómo ha podido pasar todo esto?

Ves, nuestra noche juntos ha pasado, ya despunta el día. Es hora de prepararse para ir al trabajo.

15

VASILI Timoféyevich tenía la voz suave, los movimientos indecisos. Cuando hablaba con Hanna, ella bajaba los ojos castaños y respondía de una manera apenas audible.

Después de casarse se volvieron aún más tímidos: él, un cincuentón al que los hijos de los vecinos llamaban «abuelo», se sentía turbado, se avergonzaba de haberse casado con una mujer joven cuando él tenía arrugas, el cabello cano y una incipiente calvicie, de ser feliz por su amor; la miraba susurrando: «Querida mía, mi corazoncito». En otro tiempo, de niña, ella se imaginaba a su futuro marido como una especie de Schors[28]; sería el mejor acordeonista del pueblo y escribiría versos inspirados como Tarás Shevchenko: Pero su dulce corazón había comprendido la fuerza del amor de aquel hombre maduro, desdichado, pobre, tímido, que no había vivido su propia vida sino la vida de otros. Y él también había comprendido la juvenil esperanza de ella: un día aparecería un caballero lugareño que la llevaría lejos de la estrecha cabaña de su padrastro... Y la había ido a buscar él, con sus viejas botas, las manos grandes y ennegrecidas de campesino, tosiendo con aire de culpa. Ahora la mira con adoración, con felicidad, con un sentimiento de culpabilidad, con tristeza. Y ella también, dulce, silenciosa, se siente culpable ante él.

De su unión había nacido Grisha, un niño silencioso que nunca lloraba; a veces la madre, que después del parto parecía una niña delgaducha, se acercaba a la cuna por la noche y, al ver al niño acostado con los ojos abiertos, le decía:

—Llora un poquito, Grisha; ¿por qué estás callado, siempre callado?

Incluso en la casa, marido y mujer hablaban a media voz y los vecinos se asombraban:

—Pero ¿por qué habláis tan bajo?

Era extraño que una mujer joven y un campesino viejo y poco agraciado se parecieran tanto. Tenían la misma dulzura de corazón, la misma timidez.

Trabajaban sin escatimar esfuerzos y no osaban ni siquiera lanzar un suspiro cuando el jefe de brigada los mandaba injustamente a trabajar al campo, fuera de su turno.

Una vez le ordenaron a Vasili Timoféyevich que acompañara al presidente del koljós al centro del distrito y, mientras el presidente iba a la sección agraria y a

la dirección financiera del Comité ejecutivo regional, ató los caballos a un poste y se dirigió a la tienda central para comprar regalos a su mujer: pastelitos con semillas de amapola, caramelos, rosquillas, nueces. Todo en pequeñas cantidades de ciento cincuenta gramos. De regreso en casa, desató el pañuelo blanco, y la mujer, dando palmadas de alegría, exclamó como una niña: «Ay, madre mía». Y Vasili Timoféyevich, avergonzado, salió al vestíbulo para que ella no le viera los ojos llorosos de alegría.

Para Navidad ella le había hecho un bordado en la camisa, y nunca supo que Vasili Timoféyevich Karpenko apenas había dormido aquella noche; con los pies descalzos se acercaba a la pequeña cómoda sobre la cual estaba la camisa, la acariciaba con la palma de la mano, palpaba el sencillo bordado hecho en punto de cruz. Cuando trajo a su mujer de la maternidad a casa, ella llevaba al bebé en brazos, y él sintió entonces que aunque viviera mil años nunca olvidaría aquel día.

A veces le atenazaba el miedo: ¿de veras era posible que le hubiese sobrevenido aquella felicidad? La felicidad de despertarse durante la noche y aguzar el oído para escuchar la respiración de su mujer y su hijo...

Y sin embargo así era. Volvía a casa del trabajo y veía un pañal secándose sobre la valla y el humo que salía de la chimenea. Miraba a su mujer, que se inclinaba sobre la cuna. Luego le ponía un plato de borsch sobre la mesa y sonreía. Él le miraba las manos, los cabellos que se le escapaban por debajo del pañuelo, escuchaba lo que explicaba del pequeño, de la oveja del vecino. A veces ella salía al vestíbulo y él la echaba de menos, incluso sentía nostalgia mientras la esperaba y, cuando volvía a entrar, se ponía contento, y ella, captando su mirada, le sonreía, dulce y triste.

Vasili Timoféyevich murió el primero, anticipándose dos días al pequeño Grisha. Había dado casi todas las migajas de comida a su mujer y al niño, por ese motivo murió antes que ellos. Sin duda, no ha habido en el mundo sacrificio más grande que el suyo ni una desesperación más profunda que la que él sintió al ver a su mujer deformada por el edema y a su hijo agonizante.

Ni en sus últimas horas tuvo algún reproche o sintió ira contra la gran y absurda causa acometida por el Estado y por Stalin. Ni siquiera se formuló la pregunta: ¿por qué, por qué a él, a su mujer, dulce, obediente, trabajadora, y a un silencioso niño de un año les habían infligido el sufrimiento de morir de hambre?

Dentro de sus harapos putrefactos, los tres esqueletos pasaron todo el invierno juntos: el marido, la joven esposa y el pequeño hijito se intercambiaban sus sonrisas blancas, inseparables también después de la muerte.

Sólo más tarde, al comenzar la primavera, cuando llegaron volando los estorninos, entró en la cabaña, tapándose la boca y la nariz con un pañuelo, el delegado jefe de la sección agrícola; echó una rápida ojeada a la lámpara de queroseno sin cristal, al icono religioso, a la pequeña cómoda, a las cacerolas frías, a la cama, y dijo:

—¡Aquí, dos personas y un niño!

El jefe de brigada, parado ante aquel umbral de amor y dulzura, asintió con la cabeza e hizo una marca en un trozo de papel.

Cuando salieron al aire libre, el delegado miró las cabañas blancas, los jardincitos verdes, y dijo:

—Sacad los cadáveres. Por lo que a esta ruina se refiere, no vale la pena reformarla.

Y el jefe de brigada asintió de nuevo.

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EN el trabajo Iván Grigórievich había oído decir que en el tribunal municipal aceptaban sobornos; que en la escuela de radiotécnica se podían comprar buenas cualificaciones para los jóvenes que se presentaban a los concursos; que el director de una fábrica, a cambio de dinero, abastecía de un metal que escaseaba a un artel que producía artículos de amplio consumo; que el administrador de un molino se había construido con dinero robado una casa de dos plantas con los suelos de parqué de roble; que el jefe de policía había puesto en libertad a un conocido joyero, un gran hombre de negocios, tras aceptar un suculento soborno de seiscientos mil rublos pagado por su familia; que incluso el dueño y señor de la ciudad —el primer secretario del Comité del Partido— podía, previo pago, ordenar al presidente del soviet municipal que asignara a alguien un apartamento en un edificio nuevo situado en la calle principal.

Los empleados del artel para inválidos llevaban inquietos desde la mañana. Del Comité regional se había dado a conocer el veredicto del caso contra el almacenero del artel más rico de la ciudad, que confeccionaba pellizas, abrigos de invierno para señora, gorros de astracán y de reno. Y aunque el principal acusado del proceso era un modesto almacenero, el caso había cobrado unas dimensiones grandiosas: era como un pulpo cuyos tentáculos se hubiesen enredado en la vida y el trabajo de la gran ciudad. El veredicto se esperaba desde hacía mucho tiempo y era un tema de conversación habitual durante la pausa de la comida. Algunos decían que el juez instructor que Moscú había enviado a la región era un especialista en casos importantes y que no temería destapar la vinculación en el caso de todas las autoridades locales.

Incluso los niños sabían que el procurador de la ciudad viajaba en una lujosa limusina Volga que le había regalado el almacenero calvo y tartamudo, que el secretario del Comité urbano del Partido había recibido de Riga el mobiliario para su dormitorio y su sala de estar; que la mujer del jefe de policía había ido en avión a Adler para pasar dos meses en el balneario del Consejo de ministros: todo había corrido a cuenta del almacenero, y el día de la partida había recibido como regalo un anillo de esmeraldas.

Otros, los escépticos, decían que el moscovita no se atrevería a pleitear contra los jerarcas de la ciudad y que todo el peso recaería sobre el almacenero y la dirección del artel.

Y entonces el hijo del almacenero, un estudiante universitario llegado en avión desde la capital de provincia, trajo una noticia inesperada: el juez instructor «especialista en casos de particular importancia» había archivado el caso por falta de pruebas. El almacenero había quedado en libertad y se rescindió el compromiso por parte del presidente y dos miembros del artel de no abandonar el lugar de residencia.

Por alguna razón, la decisión del imponente jurista de Moscú hizo reír y alegró a todo el mundo en el artel, tanto a los escépticos como a los optimistas. Durante la pausa de la comida, los inválidos, mientras comían pan, embutido, tomates y pepinos, se reían y bromeaban; les divertía tanto la debilidad humana del juez instructor «especialista en casos de particular importancia» como la omnipotencia del almacenero calvo y tartamudo.

Iván Grigórievich pensó que, después de todo, no era casualidad que el camino iniciado por los hombres desinteresados, los apóstoles de pies descalzos y los fanáticos de la comuna llevara a esos hombres a estar dispuestos a todo por poseer una bonita dacha, un automóvil propio y una hucha con dinero.

Por la tarde, después de salir del trabajo, Iván Grigórievich se acercó a la policlínica y entró en la consulta de un médico cuyo nombre había oído pronunciar a Anna Serguéyevna. El médico, que ya había terminado sus visitas, se estaba quitando la bata.

—Doctor, quisiera saber cuál es el estado de salud de Anna Serguéyevna Mijaliova.

—¿Y usted quién es: el marido, el padre?

—No, no soy un familiar, pero sí un amigo íntimo.

—Ah —dijo el doctor—. Bueno, puedo decirle que tiene un cáncer de pulmón. Ni la cirugía ni la estancia en un balneario serán de ayuda.

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PASARON tres semanas, y a Anna Serguéyevna la ingresaron en un hospital.

Al despedirse de Iván Grigorievich, le dijo: «Está claro que nuestro destino no era ser felices en este mundo».

Aquel día, mientras Iván Grigorievich no estaba en casa, la hermana de Anna Serguéyevna fue a buscar a Aliosha para llevárselo al pueblo.

Iván Grigorievich entró en la habitación vacía. Todo estaba en silencio. Le pareció que, después de haber vivido toda la vida solo, únicamente aquella tarde había sentido de verdad qué era la soledad.

Por la noche no concilio el sueño: estuvo pensando. «No era nuestro destino...» Sólo su lejana niñez le parecía luminosa.

Únicamente ahora que la felicidad le había mirado a los ojos, que había sentido su respiración sobre él, medía con toda intensidad lo que la vida le había dado.

Era descomunal el dolor que le causaba la conciencia de su propia impotencia, la imposibilidad de salvar a Anna Serguéyevna y de apaciguar sus últimos sufrimientos. Y extrañamente le parecía encontrar alivio a su desgracia pensando en las décadas pasadas en los campos de reclusión.

Pensaba en ellos esforzándose en comprender la verdadera naturaleza de la vida rusa, en hallar un nexo entre pasado y presente.

Tenía la esperanza de que Anna Serguéyevna volvería del hospital; entonces la haría partícipe de sus pensamientos y recuerdos.

Y ella compartiría con él el peso y la serenidad que da la comprensión. Ese pensamiento era su consuelo. En eso consistía su amor.

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IVÁN Grigórievich pensaba a menudo en los meses pasados en la prisión interna, y luego en Butirki.

Había estado tres veces encarcelado en Butirki, pero se acordaba especialmente del verano de 1937, cuando se encontraba como envuelto en una niebla, en un estado de semiinconsciencia; sólo ahora, diecisiete años después, aquella niebla se había disipado y comenzaba a distinguir lo que había sucedido.

En 1937, las celdas estaban hacinadas de gente: allí donde tenía que haber decenas de reclusos había cientos. En medio del bochorno de julio y agosto, los hombres, empapados de sudor, yacían atontados sobre los catres, estrechamente apretados los unos contra los otros; de noche sólo era posible darse la vuelta si el responsable de la celda, antiguo comandante de una división de caballería, les daba la orden para hacerlo todos al unísono. Para llegar hasta el barril— urinario había que pasar por encima de los cuerpos; al lado del barril dormían los novatos en el suelo; «paracaidistas»[29] los llamaban. En aquel calor sofocante, monstruoso, en aquella estrechez, el sueño era como un desmayo, un desvanecimiento, el delirio que acompaña al tifus.

Parecía que los muros de la prisión se estremecieran como las paredes de una caldera henchida por una enorme presión interna. La vida en Butirki hervía toda la noche. En el patio retumbaban los automóviles haciendo entrega de su carga de prisioneros que, pálidos como la muerte, recorrían con la mirada el gran reino de la prisión; rugían los enormes cuervos negros que partían para trasladar a los procesados de la prisión hacia los interrogatorios de la Lu— bianka, o bien a la prisión de tránsito de Krásnaya Presnia, a las torturas de la cárcel de Lefórtovo, al embarco en los convoyes para Siberia. A estos últimos los guardias de escolta les gritaban: «¡Recojan sus cosas!», y sus compañeros les daban el último adiós. En los pasillos inundados de una intensa luz eléctrica se oía el chancleteo de los pies de los arrestados, el tintineo de las armas de los escoltas; en las paredes había unos nichos que llamaban «cajas» donde a veces metían a toda prisa a un prisionero para que esperara allí, en la oscuridad, mientras pasaba otro prisionero escoltado por un guardia.

Las ventanas de la celda estaban tapiadas con unos tableros gruesos de madera, y la luz externa penetraba a través de una rendija estrecha; el paso de las horas no lo determinaban ni el sol ni las estrellas, sino el reglamento interno de la

prisión. La luz eléctrica estaba encendida noche y día, un resplandor despiadado, y daba la impresión de que aquel bochorno, aquel calor sofocante emanaba de la incandescencia blanca de las bombillas. Noche y día zumbaba el ventilado^ pero el aire tórrido de julio que parecía levantarse del asfalto no proporcionaba alivio a los hombres. Por la noche, era como si el aire rellenara los pulmones y el cráneo con fieltro ardiente.

Al despuntar el alba los prisioneros interrogados durante la noche volvían a las celdas, caían exhaustos sobre las literas. Algunos sollozaban, gemían; otros permanecían sentados, inmóviles, mirando fijamente enfrente con los ojos desencajados; otros aún se frotaban las piernas hinchadas y contaban febrilmente lo que había pasado. Había quienes tenían que ser arrastrados a peso por los guardias de escolta. A otros, que habían sido interrogados sin interrupción durante varios días, los llevaban en camilla a la enfermería de la cárcel. En el despacho del juez instructor la idea de la celda asfixiante y hedionda parecía una delicia, las queridas caras extenuadas de los compañeros de litera se recordaban con nostalgia.

Todas aquellas decenas, miles, decenas de miles de personas —secretarios de comités de distrito, de comités regionales, comisarios militares, jefes de secciones políticas, directores de fábricas y de sovjoses, comandantes de regimiento, de divisiones, de ejército, capitanes de barcos, agrónomos, escritores, zootécnicos, funcionarios de comercio exterior, ingenieros, embajadores, guerrilleros rojos, fiscales, presidentes de comités de fábrica, profesores universitarios— expresaban toda la diversidad de las capas de la vida que la Revolución había levantado. Junto a los rusos había bielorrusos, ucranianos, judíos de Lituania y Ucrania, armenios, georgianos, flemáticos letones, polacos, habitantes de las repúblicas de Asia central. Habían participado en la Revolución y en la guerra civil, todos ellos: soldados, obreros, campesinos, estudiantes universitarios y alumnos de liceo que habían dejado los estudios, artesanos que habían abandonado sus oficios. Gente que había derrotado a los ejércitos de Kornílov, Kaledin, Kolchak, Denikin, Yudénich y Wrangel, que como inmensos torrentes habían brotado de la periferia hacia las profundidades del devastado desierto ruso. La Revolución había suprimido el númerus clausus, el censo de propiedad y los privilegios nobiliarios, las zonas de residencia obligatoria y centenares de miles de personas —campesinos, obreros, artesanos, estudiantes, jóvenes de los pueblos de Vólogda y de los asentamientos judíos— encabezaron los comités revolucionarios, las comisiones extraordinarias de provincias y distritos, los comités de distrito del Partido, los consejos de economía nacional, los servicios de combustibles, los comités de avituallamiento, las secciones de instrucción política, los Kombedi[30]. Había comenzado entonces la construcción de un nuevo Estado sin precedentes en el mundo. Sacrificios, crueldad, privaciones: nada de eso

importaba, porque todo se hacía en nombre de Rusia y de la humanidad trabajadora, en nombre de la felicidad del mundo obrero.

Llegaron los años treinta, y los jóvenes que habían combatido en la guerra civil eran ahora hombres cuarentones con el cabello plateado. Para ellos, el tiempo de la Revolución, de los Kombedi, del primer y segundo congresos del Komintern eran su juventud, la época romántica y feliz de sus vidas. Estaban sentados en sus despachos provistos de teléfonos y secretarias, habían sustituido las guerreras por las americanas y las corbatas, viajaban en automóvil, habían aprendido a apreciar el buen vino, los balnearios de Kislovodsk, los médicos de renombre y, sin embargo, los tiempos de la budiónovka[31], las cazadoras de cuero, las sopas de mijo, las botas gastadas, las ideas planetarias y de la Comuna mundial continuaban siendo la gran época de su vida. No era para tener dachas y automóviles que construían un nuevo Estado. Lo hacían por amor a la Revolución. Y era en nombre de la Revolución y de una nueva Rusia sin propietarios de tierras ni capitalistas que habían inmolado a las víctimas, que se habían cometido actos de violencia y crueldad.

La generación de soviéticos desaparecidos entre 1936 y 1939 no era, por supuesto, monolítica.

Los primeros en caer fueron los fanáticos, los destructores del viejo mundo. Su entusiasmo, su fanatismo, su entrega a la Revolución estaban inspirados por el odio a sus enemigos.

Odiaban a la burguesía, a la nobleza, a los pequeñoburgueses, a los traidores de la clase obrera —mencheviques y socialistas—revolucionarios—, a los campesinos desahogados, a los oportunistas, a los especialistas militares, al preciado arte burgués, a los profesores universitarios vendidos a la burguesía, a los petimetres con corbatas que trabajaban para una clientela privada, a las mujeres que se empolvaban la nariz y se pavoneaban con sus medias de seda, a los estudiantes que forraban con seda blanca sus uniformes[32], a los popes, a los rabinos, a los ingenieros, a los que llevaban gorras de visera con escarapelas, a los poetas como Fet que escribían versitos depravados sobre la belleza de la naturaleza, odiaban a Kautsky, a McDonald, no habían leído a Bernstein pero lo encontraban espantoso, si bien su destino hacía eco a sus palabras: «El objetivo no es nada, el movimiento lo es todo».

Habían destruido el viejo mundo y aspiraban a uno nuevo que aún no habían construido. Los corazones de esos hombres, que habían inundado la tierra de tanta sangre, que habían odiado con tanto ardor, estaban infantilmente privados de rencor: corazones de fanáticos, tal vez de dementes. Odiaban por amor.

Habían sido la dinamita con la que el Partido había hecho volar la vieja Rusia, para limpiar el terreno donde pondrían los cimientos de la nueva construcción: el grandioso Estado de granito.

Y junto con los dinamiteros habían llegado los primeros constructores. Todos sus esfuerzos se dirigieron a organizar el aparato del Partido y del Estado, a crear fábricas y nuevas plantas, a trazar carreteras y vías férreas, a excavar canales, a mecanizar la agricultura.

Fueron los primeros «comerciantes rojos», los pioneros del algodón, de los aviones, de las fundiciones soviéticas. Sin conocer el día ni la noche, en el frío siberiano o el calor tórrido de Karakum, ponían cimientos y levantaban los muros de los rascacielos. Gvajaria, Frankfurt, Zaveniaguin, Guguel... Se cuentan con los dedos de la mano aquellos que murieron de muerte natural.

A su lado trabajaban los líderes del Partido, los fundadores y los dirigentes de las repúblicas nacionales soviéticas, de los territorios y de las regiones: Póstishev, Kírov, Vareikis, Betal Kalmikov, Faisullá Jodzháyev, Mendel Jatayévich, Eihe...

Ni uno de ellos murió de muerte natural.

Eran hombres brillantes: oradores, bibliófilos, entendidos de filosofía, amantes de la poesía, gente a la que le gustaba ir de caza, beber.

Sus teléfonos sonaban las veinticuatro horas del día y sus secretarios trabajaban en tres turnos pero, a diferencia de los fanáticos y los soñadores, ellos sabían descansar: apreciaban las dachas amplias y luminosas, la caza de jabalíes y cabras monteses, las alegres comidas dominicales que duraban horas, el coñac armenio y los vinos georgianos. En invierno ya no llevaban cazadoras de piel rotas y la tela de sus chaquetas de corte militar, a lo Stalin, era más cara que el paño inglés.

Todos destacaban por su energía, voluntad y completa inhumanidad. Todos ellos, apasionados de la naturaleza, amantes de la poesía y de la música, juerguistas, eran inhumanos.

Para ellos estaba claro que un nuevo mundo se construía para el pueblo. No les preocupaba que los principales obstáculos que se oponían a la construcción de aquel mundo nuevo se encontraran en el mismo pueblo, en los obreros, en los campesinos, en los intelectuales.

A veces daba la impresión de que la poderosa energía, la implacable voluntad y la crueldad sin límites de aquellos cabecillas del nuevo mundo tenían como único objetivo obligar a los hombres a trabajar al límite de sus fuerzas, sin

respetar horarios ni días de descanso, a vivir medio muertos de hambre, dormir en barracones, cobrar un salario miserable por el cual debían pagar impuestos indirectos, tasas, contribuciones, préstamos, imposiciones nunca antes vistos en la historia.

Y el hombre construía cosas que no eran necesarias para el hombre: el canal entre el mar Báltico y el Blanco, las minas del Ártico, las vías férreas tendidas más allá del círculo polar, las industrias ultrapesadas y las centrales eléctricas superpotentes que se escondían en la taiga desierta. A menudo daba la impresión de que aquellas fábricas, aquellos mares y canales en el desierto no sólo eran inútiles para los hombres sino también para el Estado, y que aquellas construcciones imponentes sólo sirvieran para encadenar, con un trabajo pesado, a masas de millones de hombres.

Marx, el más grande marxista Lenin y el gran continuador de su obra, Stalin, establecieron como primera verdad de la doctrina revolucionaria la primacía de la economía sobre la política.

Y ninguno de los constructores del nuevo mundo se había detenido a pensar que construyendo aquellas enormes y pesadas fábricas, inútiles para los hombres y a menudo también para el Estado, refutaban la tesis de Marx.

Sin embargo, en la base del Estado creado por Lenin y construido por Stalin estaba la política y no la economía.

Era la política la que había determinado el contenido de los planes quinquenales de Stalin, el plan de los grandes trabajos. Era la política la que triunfaba indiscutiblemente sobre la economía en todas las acciones de Stalin, en su Consejo de comisarios del pueblo, en su Gosplán, en su Comité de abastecimiento, en sus Comisariados del pueblo para la industria pesada, la agricultura, el comercio.

Los constructores no creían, como habían hecho en tiempos de la guerra civil, que la revolución mundial, la Comuna universal, se realizarían. Pero creían que en el socialismo en un solo país, la joven y nueva Rusia, estaba el alba del día socialista universal.

Pero llegó 1937, y las cárceles se llenaron de centenares de miles de hombres que pertenecían a las generaciones de la Revolución y de la guerra civil. Eran ellos los que habían defendido el Estado soviético, del cual eran padres e hijos al mismo tiempo. Pero las cárceles que habían construido para los enemigos de la nueva Rusia se abrieron ante ellos, la amenazante potencia del régimen que habían creado se abatió sobre ellos, la fuerza punitiva de la dictadura, la espada de la Revolución que ellos habían forjado, cayó sobre sus cabezas. A muchos de ellos les

pareció que había llegado el tiempo del caos, de la locura.

¿Por qué los obligaron a reconocer crímenes que no habían cometido, los declararon enemigos del pueblo, los aislaron de la vida que ellos mismos habían construido y defendido en más de una batalla?

Les parecía una locura que los igualaran a aquellos a los que habían odiado y despreciado, a aquellos a quienes habían aniquilado con feroz fanatismo, como perros rabiosos.

Habían ido a parar a las celdas de las cárceles y los barracones de los campos, junto a los mencheviques, los industriales y los propietarios de tierras de otro tiempo.

Hubo algunos que pensaron que se había producido un golpe de Estado, que sus enemigos habían tomado el poder y que, sirviéndose del lenguaje y de los conceptos soviéticos, ajustaban las cuentas con aquellos que habían concebido y construido el Estado soviético.

A veces ocurría que en las literas de la prisión dormían, uno al lado del otro, el secretario del Comité de distrito, desenmascarado como enemigo del pueblo, y el nuevo secretario del Comité de distrito que lo había desenmascarado, revelándose él mismo poco tiempo después como un enemigo del pueblo y, al cabo de un mes, se reunía con ellos en la misma celda el tercer secretario del Comité de distrito, aquel que había desenmascarado al segundo, ahora desenmascarado él mismo como enemigo del pueblo.

Todo se mezclaba: el estruendo y el rechinar de las ruedas de los convoyes que se dirigían al norte, el ladrido de los perros policiales, el crujido de las botas y los zapatos de mujer sobre la nieve helada de la taiga, el chirrido de las palas sobre la tierra congelada cuando se excavaban las fosas para dar sepultura a los muertos por escorbuto, por infarto, por congelación; los discursos de arrepentimiento de aquellos que, en las reuniones del Partido, pedían indulgencia y con los labios blancos, de muerto, repetían ante el juez instructor: «Reconozco que, convertido en agente a sueldo de los servicios de inteligencia extranjeros y movido por un odio feroz hacia todo lo soviético, me disponía a cometer actos terroristas contra los hombres de Estado soviéticos, que hacía espionaje a favor de...»; el estallido ininterrumpido de disparos de fusil y de pistola amortiguado por la piedra de Butirki y Lefórtovo: nueve gramos de plomo en el pecho o en la nuca de miles y decenas de miles de inocentes acusados de espionaje y actos terroristas particularmente perversos.

Los constructores del nuevo mundo todavía en libertad conjeturaban: «¿Vendrán a por mí? ¿No vendrán?». Todos esperaban el timbrazo nocturno, el

ruido sordo de los neumáticos bruscamente frenados delante del portal de casa.

En el caos, en la absurdidad, en la locura de las falsas acusaciones desapareció la generación de la guerra civil; habían llegado nuevos tiempos, los hombres nuevos se habían abierto camino...

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LIOVA[33] Mekler, Lev Naúmovich... En libertad llevaba zapatos del número cuarenta y cinco y un traje moscovita de la talla cincuenta y ocho, y ahora le habían detenido por el artículo 58: traición a la patria, terrorismo, sabotaje y otras naderías.

No lo habían fusilado, probablemente porque había sido uno de los primeros en ser arrestado, cuando aún no había tanta libertad en la aplicación de las penas de muerte.

Entornando sus ojos miopes de mirada distraída, tropezando, había recorrido todos los círculos del infierno de las prisiones y todos los campos, y no había muerto porque el fuego de la fe, que desde la adolescencia ardía en sus entrañas, lo había protegido de los cuarenta grados bajo cero, del intenso frío nocturno y del viento despiadado, de la distrofia y del escorbuto; no había muerto cuando la barcaza atestada de presos se hundió en el Yeniséi; no murió de disentería.

Los presos comunes no le habían apuñalado; no le habían torturado en la celda de castigo, el delegado operativo no lo había golpeado hasta la muerte durante el interrogatorio. No lo habían fusilado durante las grandes purgas, cuando fusilaban a uno de cada diez hombres.

¿De dónde le venía a él —hijo de un melancólico y astuto tendero de la localidad de Fástov, alumno de una escuela de comercio, lector de la «Biblioteca dorada» y de Louis Boussenard—, de dónde le venía a él aquella potente llama de fanatismo? Ni él ni su padre habían albergado odio hacia el capitalismo en las minerías o en los humeantes y polvorientos talleres de las fábricas.

¿Quién le había dado un alma de luchador? ¿El ejemplo de Zheliábov y Kaliáyev, la sabiduría del Manifiesto comunista, los sufrimientos de los pobres que vivían junto a él?

¿O tal vez aquel fuego interior, aquellos carbones ardientes se ocultaban en el abismo milenario de la herencia, dispuestos a inflamarse en la lucha contra los soldados del César de Roma, contra las hogueras de la Inquisición española, contra el hambriento frenesí del estudio de la Tora, en los grupos de autodefensa local contra los pogromos?

¿Quizá la secular cadena de humillaciones, la nostalgia del cautiverio de

Babilonia, las humillaciones del gueto y las miserias de las zonas de residencia obligatoria para los judíos habían originado y forjado aquella sed insaciable de justicia que encandecía el alma de bolchevique de Lev Mekler?

Su incapacidad de adaptarse a la vida de este mundo suscitaba ironía y admiración. Algunos consideraban un santo a aquel jefe komsomol que llevaba las sandalias agujereadas, una camisa de percal con el cuello abierto, una cazadora de cuero rota y que, en lugar de gorro, se cubría la cabeza con una budiónovka con una estrella roja descolorida, pálida, como desangrada. Y aquel hombre harapiento, mal afeitado, sin otra cosa que ponerse en invierno que un impermeable desprovisto de botones, y que era el responsable de justicia en Ucrania, se bajaba del automóvil para ir a su despacho en el Comisariado del pueblo.

Daba la impresión de estar desarmado ante la vida, de no ser de este mundo, pero la gente se acordaba de cómo lo habían escuchado en religioso silencio durante los tempestuosos mítines en el frente, cómo lo habían seguido bajo el fuego de las ametralladoras de Wrangel.

Era un predicador, un apóstol y un combatiente de la Revolución socialista mundial. Por amor a la Revolución estaba dispuesto, sin dudarlo, a sacrificar la vida, el amor de una mujer, a toda su familia. Sólo había una cosa que no podía sacrificar: la felicidad. Porque sacrificando por la Revolución todo aquello que el hombre aprecia en la Tierra, marchando directo a la hoguera por ella, él habría sido feliz.

El futuro reino mundial le parecía infinitamente bello, y por eso Mekler estaba dispuesto a utilizar la más despiadada violencia.

Era bueno por naturaleza, nunca habría aplastado con la palma de la mano a un mosquito que le chupara la sangre, sino que lo habría apartado con un delicado golpecito de la mano. Si sorprendía a una chinche en la escena del delito, la envolvía con un trozo de papel y la sacaba fuera, a la calle.Su dedicación al bien y a la Revolución estuvo marcada por la sangre, la ausencia de piedad hacia el sufrimiento.

Coherente con los principios revolucionarios, había enviado a la cárcel a su propio padre, había testificado contra él en el tribunal de la Cheká regional. Cruel y sombrío, le había dado la espalda a su hermana cuando fue a suplicarle que intercediera por su marido, acusado de saboteador.

Dulce como era, se había mostrado despiadado con aquellos que tenían ideas y opiniones diferentes. La Revolución le parecía un ser indefenso, infantilmente confiado, rodeado de traiciones, de la crueldad de los malhechores,

del lodo de los corruptores.

Y él era despiadado con los enemigos de la Revolución.

En su conciencia revolucionaria sólo había una mancha: a escondidas del Partido había ayudado a su anciana madre, la viuda de un hombre fusilado por los órganos represivos, y cuando murió dio dinero para su funeral religioso: aquélla había sido su última y lamentable voluntad.

Su vocabulario, su manera de pensar, sus actos tenían una única fuente: los libros escritos en nombre de la Revolución, del derecho revolucionario, la moral revolucionaria, la poesía de la Revolución y su estrategia, la marcha de sus soldados, sus visiones de futuro, sus cantos.

Con los ojos de la Revolución miraba el cielo estrellado y el follaje primaveral de los abedules; de su dulcísima copa encantada había bebido la pócima del primer amor; a través de su sabiduría conoció la lucha de los patricios y de los esclavos, los señores feudales y los siervos, las luchas de clase entre industriales y proletarios. Ella era su madre, su tierna amante, su sol, su destino.

Y mira por dónde la Revolución le había metido en una celda de la prisión interna, le había roto ocho dientes; pisoteándolo con sus botas de oficial, insultándole, cubriéndole de injurias, había pretendido que él, su hijo, el apóstol predilecto, confesase haberla envenenado secretamente, se reconociera su enemigo mortal.

No renegó de ella, naturalmente; su fe no vaciló ni siquiera un instante en aquellos interrogatorios que se prolongaban durante cientos de horas; no vaciló cuando, tumbado en el suelo, vio la punta de una bota bien limpia y brillante al lado de su boca ensangrentada.

Ruda, torpe, cruel fue la Revolución en esos interrogatorios y aquellas torturas de días y días, cuando la fidelidad y la sumisión dócil del bolchevique Lev Mekler suscitaban en ella una rabia frenética.

De la misma manera monta en cólera el amo que quiere alejar a su viejo perro bastardo, que se obstina en seguirlo. Primero aprieta el paso, luego le grita, pisotea contra el suelo, después levanta el brazo amenazadoramente, le tira piedras. El perro se aleja corriendo, luego se para, pero cuando el dueño, después de haber dado un centenar de pasos, se vuelve a mirarlo, ve al perro cojeando y renqueante apresurándose detrás de él, con invariable persistencia.Y lo que para el dueño resulta más repugnante y odioso es su mirada perruna: dulce, triste, amorosa, fanáticamente devota.

Aquel amor desata la ira del amo, y el perro se da cuenta de ello sin lograr

comprender por qué. No puede entender que, cometiendo aquella inconcebible injusticia, el amo quiera tranquilizar un poco la propia conciencia. La dulzura, la fidelidad del perro le han ofuscado la razón hasta el punto de que lo odia más de lo que nunca ha odiado a los lobos, los lobos de los que el mismo perro ha defendido el hogar de su juventud. Con brutalidad quiere sofocar el amor del perro.

El perro le sigue, confuso por la súbita e inexplicable crueldad del amo. ¿Por qué? ¿Por qué?

No puede comprender que en aquel repentino odio hacia él no hay nada absurdo: todo es real y racional.

Aquel odio es normal, comprensible, de una lógica matemática. Pero al perro le parece que todo aquello no es más que una alucinación, una absurdidad disparatada, incluso está inquieto por su amo, le gustaría salvarlo de su ofuscamiento no por sí mismo sino por él. No puede abandonarlo, lo ama.

Pero ahora el amo ha comprendido que el perro no lo dejará, que sólo le queda una cosa por hacer: estrangularlo, pegarle un tiro.

Y para que la ejecución de aquel perro que lo venera y le implora no le pese en la conciencia, no provoque la reprobación de los vecinos, el amo decide transformarlo, mediante un hábil artificio, en su enemigo: antes de morirse el perro tendrá que confesar que quería morder a su amo.

Matar a un enemigo es más fácil que matar a un amigo.

Después de todo, en la que fue su primera casa —que había construido sobre lúgubres y deshabitadas ruinas—, en la casa de su juventud, en la casa de sus oraciones puras, el perro había sido su amigo, su guardián, su compañero inseparable.

Que reconozca entonces ahora, el perro, que se había conchabado con los lobos.

Y en sus últimos estertores de agonía, estrangulado con una cuerda, el perro mira al amo con dulzura y amor, con aquella fe que condujo a la muerte a los primeros mártires cristianos.

Pero el perro no había comprendido algo sencillo: que el amo había abandonado su casa de entusiasmo juvenil y de oración para trasladarse a una casa de granito y cristal donde aquel perro de corral se había convertido en una carga absurda para él, y no sólo en una carga sino también en un peligro. Y lo mató.

PASARON los años; la niebla y el polvo que impedían ver lo que había pasado se disiparon. Lo que parecía caos, locura, autodestrucción, confluencia de absurdas casualidades, aquello que con su misteriosa y trágica insensatez hacía enloquecer a la gente, comenzó a perfilarse poco a poco con los trazos precisos, claros y distintos de una nueva vida, de una nueva actividad.

El destino de la generación de la Revolución comenzó a revelarse de un modo nuevo, lógico y no místico. Sólo ahora Iván Grigórievich comenzaba a abarcar con la mente el nuevo destino del país, un destino nacido sobre los huesos de la generación perdida.

Aquella generación bolchevique se había formado en los días de la Revolución, en los tiempos de la hegemonía de las ideas de la Comuna mundial, en la época del trabajo voluntario y entusiasta de los famosos sábados comunistas. Había aceptado la herencia de la guerra mundial y la guerra civil: la ruina, el hambre, el tifus, la anarquía, el bandolerismo. Por boca de Lenin había declarado que había un Partido capaz de conducir a Rusia por una nueva vía. Había aceptado, sin vacilar, la herencia de siglos de gobierno despótico en Rusia bajo el cual habían nacido y desaparecido decenas de generaciones sin conocer más que un único derecho: la servidumbre.La generación bolchevique de los tiempos de la guerra civil había participado bajo el liderazgo de Lenin en la disolución de la Asamblea constituyente y en la supresión de los partidos revolucionarios democráticos que habían luchado contra el absolutismo ruso.

La generación bolchevique de la guerra civil no creía en el valor de la libertad del individuo, en la libertad de palabra, en la libertad de prensa en el contexto de la Rusia burguesa.

Como Lenin, consideraba estúpidas e insignificantes las libertades con las que soñaban muchos obreros revolucionarios y la intelligentsia.

El joven Estado destruyó los partidos democráticos, limpiando el camino para la construcción soviética. A finales de los años veinte, aquellos partidos habían sido liquidados por completo. La gente que había estado en la cárcel bajo el reinado del zar volvió a la cárcel o fue enviada a los campos de trabajo forzado.

En 1930 se levantó el hacha de la colectivización general.

Pero el hacha se levantaría de nuevo poco tiempo después. Aquella vez el

golpe recayó sobre la generación de la guerra civil. Una pequeña parte de aquella generación se salvó, pero su alma, su fe en una Comuna mundial y su romántica fuerza revolucionaria se habían ido con los que fueron aniquilados en 1937. Los que quedaron continuaron viviendo y trabajando y se adaptaron a una época nueva, a los hombres nuevos.

Los hombres nuevos no creían en la Revolución, no eran hijos de la Revolución sino del Estado creado por ella.

El nuevo Estado no necesitaba santos apóstoles, constructores frenéticos, obsesos, discípulos rebosantes de fe. Ni siquiera de esclavos tenía necesidad el nuevo Estado: sólo necesitaba funcionarios, empleados. La preocupación del Estado consistía en que sus empleados se revelaban a veces como gente demasiado mediocre, y tramposa, por añadidura.

El terror y la dictadura devoraron a aquellos que habían puesto los cimientos. Y el Estado, que parecía ser un medio, resultó ser un fin.

Los hombres que crearon aquel Estado pensaron que éste sería el medio para realizar sus ideales. Pero fueron sus sueños y sus ideales los que sirvieron de medio para el Estado grande y terrible. El Estado se transformó de servidor del pueblo en autócrata sombrío. No era el pueblo el que necesitaba el terror en 1919, no era el pueblo el que había abolido la libertad de prensa y de palabra, no era el pueblo el que necesitaba la muerte de millones de campesinos, de esos campesinos que constituían la mayor parte del pueblo, no era el pueblo el que había llenado las cárceles y los campos en 1937, no era el pueblo el que necesitaba el exterminio por deportación a la taiga de los tártaros de Crimea, los calmucos, los balearos, los búlgaros y los griegos rusificados, los chechenos y los alemanes del Volga, no fue el pueblo el que abolió la libertad de sembrar, el derecho a la huelga de los trabajadores, no fue el pueblo el que gravó con impuestos monstruosos el precio de coste de las mercancías.

El Estado se convirtió en el amo. El elemento nacional pasó de la forma a la sustancia y acabó siendo esencial, mientras se relegaba el elemento socialista a un segundo plano: a la fraseología, a la cáscara, a la forma externa.

La ley sagrada de la vida se formuló con una evidencia trágica: la libertad del hombre está por encima de todo; no hay en el mundo objetivo por el cual se pueda sacrificar la libertad del hombre.

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QUÉ extraño. Pensando en 1937, pensando en las mujeres enviadas a los campos de trabajos forzados a causa de sus maridos, recordando la colectivización total y la hambruna en el campo, pensando en las leyes que castigaban a los obreros con la prisión por un retraso de veinte minutos o a los campesinos con ocho años en un campo penitenciario por haber escondido alguna espiga de trigo, Iván Grigórievich no se acordaba del hombre bigotudo, con botas y guerrera militar.

¡Pensaba en Lenin! Como si su vida no se hubiese interrumpido el 21 de enero de 19Z4.

Iván Grigórievich anotaba a veces en un cuaderno escolar que había dejado Aliosha sus pensamientos sobre Lenin y Stalin.

Todas las victorias del Partido y del Estado estaban ligadas al nombre de Lenin. Pero también Vladímir Ilich cargaba a sus espaldas con todas las crueldades cometidas en el país.

Su pasión revolucionaria, sus discursos, sus artículos, sus llamadas explicaban todo cuanto había sucedido en el campo en 1937, la nueva clase de funcionarios, la nueva pequeña burguesía, los trabajos forzados de los detenidos.

Poco a poco, con los años, casi inadvertidamente,los rasgos de personalidad de Lenin cambiaron, cambió el aspecto del estudiante Volodia Uliánov, del joven marxista Tulin[34], del deportado en Siberia, del revolucionario emigrado, del periodista, del pensador Vladímir Ilich Lenin; cambió el semblante del hombre que proclamó la era de la revolución socialista mundial, el fundador de la dictadura revolucionaria en Rusia, que liquidó todos los partidos revolucionarios excepto uno —aquel que a él le parecía más revolucionario—, que liquidó la Asamblea constituyente, que representaba a todas las clases y los partidos de la Rusia posrevolucionaria, y que creó los soviets donde según él sólo debían estar representados los obreros revolucionarios y los campesinos.

Los rasgos de Lenin, familiares por sus retratos, cambiaban; cambiaba la imagen del primer presidente del gobierno soviético, Vladímir Ilich Uliánov, Lenin.

La empresa leninista continuaba, y la imagen del difunto Lenin se enriquecía al mismo tiempo que la obra que había emprendido, con rasgos nuevos.

Era un intelectual, procedía de una familia de la intelligentsia activa. Sus hermanos y hermanas eran intelectuales revolucionarios: Aleksandr, el hermano mayor, miembro del partido Naródnaya Volia, se convirtió en un héroe, en un mártir santo de la Revolución.

Los memorialistas afirman que siendo ya guía de la Revolución, fundador del Partido, jefe del gobierno soviético, continuaba siendo sencillo. No fumaba ni bebía, y nunca en su vida injurió a nadie con palabras indecentes o blasfemias. Su tiempo libre era limpio, tenía placeres de estudiante: la música, el teatro, un libro, un paseo. Su vestimenta era siempre democrática, casi pobre.

¿Cómo era posible que él, que iba al teatro —al gallinero— con la corbata arrugada y una chaqueta vieja, que escuchaba la Appassionata, que leía y releía Guerra y paz, el hijo predilecto de su madre, el Volodia adorado por sus hermanas, se hubiese convertido en el fundador de aquel Estado que había condecorado con la orden suprema —la suya, la orden de Lenin— el pecho de Yagoda, Yezhov, Beria, Merkúlov, Abakúmov? La orden de Lenin fue concedida a Lidia Timashuk el día del aniversario de la muerte de Vladímir Ilich: ¿era una confirmación de que la obra de Lenin se había marchitado o, al contrario, de su triunfo?

Pasaron los años de los planes quinquenales, pasaron décadas; acontecimientos extraordinarios, llenos de incandescente actualidad, se congelaron como bloques atrapados en el cemento del tiempo, se transformaron en la historia del Estado soviético.

o se ven retratos de Lenin.

No los ha habido ni los hay.

Los siglos terminarán, al parecer;

el retrato inacabado.

¿Acaso comprendía el poeta el trágico sentido de lo que había escrito acerca de Lenin? Los rasgos de carácter destacados por los biógrafos y memorialistas, rasgos que parecían esenciales y que encantaron a millones de corazones y de mentes, resultaron casuales para el curso de la historia; la historia del Estado ruso no escogió los rasgos humanos, humanitarios del carácter de Lenin, sino que los

arrojó como cachivaches inútiles. La historia del Estado no sabe qué hacer con el Lenin que, con las palmas apoyadas sobre los ojos, escucha la Appassionata, ni con su admiración por Guerra y paz, ni con la democrática modestia de Lenin, ni con su cordialidad y la atención que prestaba a la gente modesta como secretarios y chóferes, ni con sus conversaciones con los hijos de los campesinos, ni con su relación afectuosa con los animales domésticos, ni con su sincero dolor cuando Mártov de amigo pasó a convertirse en enemigo.

En cambio, todo lo que se solía poner entre paréntesis como rasgos de carácter pasajeros, contingentes, originados por las circunstancias particulares de la clandestinidad y del encarnizamiento de la lucha de los primeros años soviéticos, se reveló constante, determinante.

Precisamente ese rasgo del carácter de Lenin no mencionado por los memorialistas fue el que determinó su orden de efectuar un registro en casa de un Plejánov prácticamente agonizante; esos rasgos indican su total intolerancia hacia la democracia política.

Un industrial o un comerciante de origen campesino, aunque viva en un palacete y viaje en su propio yate, conserva siempre los rasgos del carácter campesino: el amor a las sopas de col agria, al kvas[35] al lenguaje popular, certero y rudo. El mariscal con el uniforme bordado de oro conserva el amor al cigarrillo de majorka, áspero y fuerte, liado con sus propias manos, y al humor sencillo de los chistes soldadescos.

Pero ¿acaso esos rasgos de carácter, esos recuerdos tienen alguna influencia en los destinos de las fábricas, en la vida de millones de personas que están ligadas a ellas por trabajo y por destino? ¿Acaso ejercen una influencia significativa en el movimiento de la Bolsa o en el movimiento de tropas?

No es con el amor a las sopas de col ni a los cigarrillos de majorka que se gana capital o que los generales conquistan la gloria.

Una mujer, que plasmó por escrito sus recuerdos de Lenin, describió un paseo dominical que dio con él en Suiza. Jadeando por la escarpada cuesta, llegaron a la cima y se sentaron sobre una piedra. Ella tiene la impresión de que la mirada de Vladímir Ilich se está impregnando de toda la belleza de los Alpes. Aquella mujer joven se imagina con emoción que la poesía llena el alma de Vladímir Ilich cuando éste de repente exclama, con un suspiro:

—Ah, cómo nos perjudican, los mencheviques.

Aquel gracioso episodio revela de alguna manera la naturaleza de Lenin: sobre un plato de la balanza el mundo de Dios, sobre el otro, la causa del Partido.

La Revolución de Octubre seleccionó los rasgos de carácter de Vladímir Ilich que le eran útiles; los otros, los rechazó.

En el curso de la historia del movimiento revolucionario ruso, los rasgos de amor al pueblo —presentes en muchos intelectuales revolucionarios rusos, cuya dulzura y disposición a los sufrimientos podría decirse que no encuentran parangón en los tiempos del primer cristianismo— se mezclaron con otros rasgos diametralmente opuestos, también presentes en muchos revolucionarios reformadores rusos: el desprecio y la inflexibilidad hacia el sufrimiento humano, la admiración por el principio abstracto, la firme voluntad de aniquilar no sólo a los enemigos sino también a los compañeros de causa apenas se desviasen un poco en la interpretación de aquellos principios abstractos. La sectaria dedicación a alcanzar el fin propuesto, la disposición a aplastar la libertad viva, la libertad presente, en nombre de una libertad imaginaria, a destruir los principios morales cotidianos por los del futuro, se manifiestan con claridad en el carácter de Pestel, Bakunin, Nekáyev, en algunos actos y en algunas declaraciones de los miembros de Naródnaya Volia.

No, no sólo el amor, no sólo la compasión encauzó a estos hombres por el camino de la Revolución. Las fuentes, los orígenes de esos caracteres son lejanos; se pierden en las entrañas milenarias de Rusia.

Caracteres parecidos existían ya en siglos precedentes, pero el siglo xx los empujó fuera de las bambalinas al escenario de la vida.

Un carácter así se comporta en medio de la humanidad como el cirujano en las salas de una clínica. El interés que muestra por los enfermos, por sus padres, por las mujeres, las madres, sus bromas y sus discusiones, su lucha a favor de los niños abandonados y su preocupación por los obreros que han alcanzado la edad de jubilación, todo eso no es nada, tonterías, cosas superficiales. Su alma está en el bisturí.

La esencia de estos hombres reside en su fanática fe en la omnipotencia del bisturí. Aquel bisturí es el gran teórico, el líder filosófico del siglo XX.

A lo largo de sus cincuenta y cuatro años de vida, Lenin no sólo escuchó la Appassionata, releyó Guerra y paz, mantuvo conversaciones sinceras con los delegados de los campesinos, se preocupó por saber si su secretario tenía un abrigo para el invierno, admiró la naturaleza rusa. Claro, es natural, al lado de la imagen está también la persona.

Y se pueden imaginar una multitud de rasgos y particularidades de Lenin, que se manifestaban en su vida cotidiana, aquella vida que nadie rehúye, ni los guías del pueblo ni los médicos estomatólogos ni los sastres en un taller de

confección para señoras.

Aquellos rasgos se manifiestan en momentos diferentes del día y la noche: cuando por la mañana el hombre se lava la cara, cuando come la kasha[36], cuando mira por la ventana a una mujer bonita cuya falda ha sido levantada por el viento, cuando se monda los dientes con una cerilla, cuando está celoso de su mujer o despierta los celos de ella, cuando en la sauna se examina las piernas desnudas y se rasca las axilas, cuando lee fragmentos de periódico en el baño tratando de juntar los trozos rotos, cuando emite un sonido inconveniente y, para enmascararlo, tose o canturrea.

Ese tipo de cosas, que se encuentran en todas las vidas, las grandes y las pequeñas, también existían en la vida de Lenin.

Tal vez la barriga de Lenin obedeciera al hecho de que se atiborraba de macarrones con mantequilla, que prefería a las verduras.

Tal vez, a escondidas de todos, discutía con su mujer, Nadiezhda Konstantinovna, porque no se lavaba los pies ni se cepillaba los dientes, porque tampoco quería cambiarse la camisa con el cuello sucio.

Pero al penetrar más allá de las fortificaciones, que sólo dejan ver una imagen aparentemente humana pero sumamente convencional e idealizada del jefe, es posible, avanzando a saltos y arrastrándose por el suelo, llegar a la esencia auténtica y despojada de adornos de Lenin, la que ninguno de sus biógrafos ha mencionado nunca.

Pero ¿qué aportaría el conocimiento de los rasgos auténticos, secretos —que la historia ha ignorado— de la conducta de Lenin en el cuarto de baño, el dormitorio, el comedor? ¿Acaso nos ayudaría a comprender en profundidad al líder de la nueva Rusia, al fundador de un nuevo orden mundial? ¿Nos permitiría establecer un nexo verdadero entre el carácter de Lenin y el carácter del Estado que fundó? Para hacer eso, habría que suponer que los rasgos distintivos del Lenin líder político son iguales a las cualidades del Lenin de la vida cotidiana. Pero una suposición semejante sería del todo arbitraria y no es posible hacerla. En efecto, ese tipo de nexo tiene un sentido tanto positivo como negativo.

Digamos entonces que en sus relaciones personales, cuando se quedaba a pasar la noche en casa de un amigo o daba paseos con ellos, cuando prestaba ayuda a sus camaradas, Lenin se mostraba siempre delicado, dulce, amable. Pero al mismo tiempo se distinguía por la falta de piedad, la dureza y la brutalidad para con sus adversarios políticos. Nunca admitía que éstos pudiesen tener razón, ni siquiera parcialmente, o que él se había equivocado.

«Vendido», «lacayo», «rastrero», «mercenario», «agente», «Judas»,

«comprado por treinta denarios»: con estas palabras Lenin definía a menudo a sus oponentes.

En una discusión Lenin no se esforzaba en convencer a su adversario. Nunca se dirigía a él, sino a los testigos de la discusión. Su objetivo era mofarse y comprometer a su oponente. Los testigos podían ser unos pocos íntimos, miles de delegados en un congreso o bien la masa de millones de lectores de un periódico.

En la discusión Lenin no buscaba la verdad, buscaba la victoria. Tenía que ganar a toda costa y, para conseguirlo, muchos medios eran buenos: la zancadilla inesperada, la bofetada simbólica, atizar un mamporro en la cabeza.

Es evidente que los rasgos cotidianos, habituales y familiares de Lenin no tenían ninguna relación con los rasgos del líder del nuevo orden mundial.

Luego, cuando la discusión pasaba de las páginas de las revistas y los periódicos a la calle, a los campos de centeno y a los campos de batalla, también ahí los métodos más crueles demostraban ser buenos.

La intolerancia de Lenin, su perseverancia inquebrantable para alcanzar el objetivo, el desprecio a la libertad, la crueldad hacia los que pensaban diferente a él y la capacidad para borrar de la faz de la Tierra, sin que le temblara el pulso, no sólo las fortalezas sino también las administraciones rurales, de distrito, de provincias que se permitían cuestionar la justicia de sus tesis: todas esas características no se manifestaron en Lenin después de Octubre. Existían ya en Volodia Uliánov. Tenían raíces profundas.

Todas sus capacidades, su voluntad, su pasión estaban subordinadas a un único objetivo: hacerse con el poder.

Para ello lo sacrificó todo; para alcanzar el poder inmoló, mató lo más sagrado que Rusia poseía: la libertad. Pero ¿qué experiencia podía tener la libertad, una criatura de sólo ocho meses, nacida en un país de esclavitud milenaria?

Las cualidades del intelectual, que parecían ser el contenido verdadero del alma y el carácter de Lenin, asumieron una forma exterior, insignificante, mientras se revelaba su auténtico carácter: una voluntad férrea, inflexible, frenética.

¿Qué condujo a Lenin por el camino de la Revolución? ¿El amor a la humanidad? ¿El deseo de acabar con los desastres de los campesinos, la miseria y la ausencia de derechos de los obreros? ¿La confianza en la verdad del marxismo, en la justicia de su Partido?

Para él la Revolución rusa no significaba la libertad de Rusia. Pero ese poder que aspiraba alcanzar con tanto ardor no lo quería para su uso personal.

Aquí también aparece una de las particularidades de Lenin: la complejidad

de un personaje derivada de la propia sencillez.

Para ambicionar el poder con tanta fuerza hay que tener una ambición política enorme, una inmensa avidez de poder. Son atributos rudos, primitivos. Sin embargo, ese político ambicioso, capaz de todo con tal de satisfacer su sed de poder, era un hombre extraordinariamente modesto y no buscó conquistar el poder para sí mismo. Ahí termina la simplicidad y comienza la complejidad.

Si imaginamos al hombre Lenin idéntico al Lenin político, se dibuja un carácter primitivo y grosero: prepotente, autoritario, despiadado, frenéticamente ambicioso, dogmático y pendenciero.

Si trasladáramos esos rasgos a su vida cotidiana, a sus relaciones con la mujer, la madre, los hijos, el amigo y el vecino de piso, sería terrible.

Pero las cosas eran completamente diferentes. El hombre en la arena pública era el opuesto del hombre en la vida privada. Con sus virtudes y sus defectos, con sus defectos y sus virtudes. Y el resultado es una imagen completamente diferente, compleja, a veces trágica.

Una ambición política desenfrenada combinada con una vieja chaqueta, un vaso de té claro, una buhardilla estudiantil.

La capacidad para pisotear en el fango al adversario sin vacilar, para ensordecer a un oponente en la discusión iba ligada de manera incomprensible a una sonrisa amable, a una delicadeza tímida.

La despiadada crueldad, el desprecio a lo más sagrado de la Revolución rusa: la libertad, y allí al lado, en el pecho del mismo hombre, el puro entusiasmo juvenil hacia una música hermosa, un buen libro.

Lenin... una imagen divinizada. Otro Lenin: el bonachón monolítico creado por sus enemigos y en el que aparecen unidos y fundidos los rasgos atroces del líder del nuevo orden mundial con los rasgos de un individuo burdo y primitivo en su vida privada. Ésos eran los únicos rasgos que sus enemigos vieron en él. Y por último, aquel Lenin que a mí me parece el más cercano a la realidad, un Lenin que no es fácil comprender.

PARA comprender a Lenin no basta con observar atentamente los rasgos humanos y cotidianos del Lenin político; en primer lugar, es preciso establecer la relación entre el carácter de Lenin y el mito del carácter nacional ruso, y luego con el destino, el carácter de la historia rusa.

El ascetismo de Lenin y su modestia natural son típicos de los peregrinos rusos; su honestidad y su fe responden al ideal popular del maestro de la vida; su apego a la naturaleza rusa, a sus prados y bosques está ligado con el sentimiento campesino. Su apertura al mundo del pensamiento occidental, a Hegel y Marx, su capacidad de asimilar y de expresar el espíritu de Occidente es la manifestación de un rasgo profundamente ruso enunciado por Chaadáyev, es esa simpatía universal, la sorprendente capacidad rusa de entrar en el espíritu de otros pueblos, que Dostoyevski veía en Pushkin. Ese rasgo emparienta a Lenin con Pushkin. Y también era una característica de Pedro el Grande.

La obsesión y convicción de Lenin recuerdan el frenesí de Awakum, su fe. Awakum es un fenómeno propio de Rusia, nativo.

En el siglo xix los pensadores nacionales buscaban en las particularidades del carácter nacional ruso, en el alma rusa, en la religiosidad rusa, una explicación a la vía histórica de Rusia.

Chaadáyev, uno de los hombres más inteligentes del siglo xix, subrayó el espíritu ascético y de sacrificio del cristianismo ruso, su naturaleza bizantina que nada extraño había enturbiado.

Dostoyevski consideraba que la humanidad total, la aspiración a la fusión con toda la humanidad, era la verdadera base del alma rusa.

Al siglo xx ruso le gusta repetir las predicciones que hicieron los pensadores y los profetas de la Rusia decimonónica: Gógol, Chaadáyev, Belinski, Dostoyevski.

¿Y a quién no le gustaría repetir semejantes cosas dichas sobre uno mismo...?

Los profetas del siglo xix predijeron que en el futuro Rusia se pondría a la cabeza del desarrollo espiritual de los pueblos, no sólo de Europa, sino del mundo entero.

De lo que hablaban los profetas no era de la gloria militar de los rusos sino de la gloria del corazón ruso, de la fe rusa, del ejemplo ruso.

«El pájaro troika...» «Es el alma rusa, universal y panhumanista, la que acogerá dentro de sí, en amor fraternal, a todos nuestros hermanos, y al final, tal vez pronunciará la palabra definitiva de la gran armonía universal, del acuerdo fraternal definitivo de todos los pueblos según la ley evangélica de Cristo...» «Cuando ocupemos nuestro puesto natural entre los pueblos destinados a influir sobre la humanidad no sólo con la tiranía sino también con las ideas...»

«¿No es así como tú, Rusia, corres ágil e inalcanzable como una troika? A tu paso, los caminos humean, los puentes retumban...[37]»

También aquí Chaadáyev distinguió con genialidad un rasgo sorprendente de la historia rusa: «El hecho colosal de la esclavización gradual de nuestro campesinado no representa más que la consecuencia rigurosamente lógica de nuestra historia».

El aplastamiento implacable de la personalidad, la subordinación servil de la persona al soberano y al Estado acompaña de forma obsesiva la historia milenaria de Rusia. Sí, y esos rasgos también los vieron y los reconocieron los profetas rusos.

Pero al lado de la supresión del ser humano por parte del príncipe, del soberano y el Estado, los profetas de Rusia reconocieron una pureza, una profundidad, una claridad desconocidas en el mundo occidental: la fuerza cristiana del alma rusa. A ella, al alma rusa, los profetas le pronosticaron un futuro grandioso y radiante. Todos estaban de acuerdo en afirmar que en el alma de los rusos la idea del cristianismo se había encarnado en una forma no estatal, ascética, bizantina, antioccidental, y que las fuerzas inherentes al alma popular rusa se expresarían en la poderosa influencia que ejercerían sobre los pueblos europeos. Ellas purificarían, transformarían y alumbrarían dentro de un espíritu de fraternidad la vida del mundo occidental; y el mundo occidental seguiría al hombre ruso con confianza y alegría. Esas profecías de las inteligencias más potentes y de los corazones más nobles de Rusia tenían en común un rasgo fatal: todos ellos vieron la fuerza del alma rusa y pronosticaron el significado que tendría en el mundo pero ¿no vieron que las particularidades del alma rusa no nacían de la libertad, que el alma rusa es esclava desde hace miles de años? ¿Qué podía dar al mundo una esclava milenaria, incluso una vez convertida en todopoderosa?

Parecía que el siglo xix por fin se había acercado a ese tiempo anunciado por los profetas de Rusia, el tiempo en el que Rusia, tan receptiva y dispuesta a absorber las influencias espirituales de otras naciones, se disponía a influir al mundo.

Durante cien años Rusia se impregnó de una idea de libertad importada del extranjero. Durante cien años Rusia bebió de los labios de Pestel, Riléyev, Chernishevski, Lavrov, Bakunin; de los labios de sus escritores; de los labios de sus mártires: Zheliábov, Sofia Perióvskaya, Timoféi Mijáilov, Kibálchich, de los labios de Plejánov, Kropotkin, Mijailovski, de la boca de Sazónov y Kaliáyev, de la boca de Lenin, Mártov, Chernov, de la boca de su intelligentsia, sus estudiantes y sus obreros progresistas: el pensamiento de filósofos y pensadores de la libertad occidental. Un pensamiento traído por libros, cátedras universitarias, estudiantes de Heidelberg y de París, traído por las botas de los soldados de Bonaparte, por ingenieros y comerciantes instruidos, traí do por occidentales sin recursos que iban a servir a Rusia y que tenían un sentido de la dignidad humana que suscitaba el asombro y la envidia de los príncipes rusos.

Y así fue como, fecundada por las ideas de libertad y de dignidad del hombre, se hizo la Revolución rusa.

¿Qué iba a hacer el alma rusa con las ideas del mundo occidental, cómo las iba a transformar dentro de sí misma, en qué forma las cristalizaría, qué germen se preparaba a hacer brotar en el subconsciente de la historia?

... Rusia, ¿adonde corres? No hay respuesta...

Ante la joven Rusia, liberada de las cadenas del zarismo, desfilaron, como si se tratara de pretendientes, decenas, tal vez centenares de doctrinas revolucionarias, creencias, líderes de Partido, profecías, programas... Con qué pasión y avidez, con qué súplica, los jefes del progreso ruso miraban la cara de la joven.

Moderados, fanáticos, trudoviki, populistas, amigos de los obreros, defensores de los campesinos, industriales instruidos, clérigos ilustrados, anarquistas furiosos formaban un gran círculo a su alrededor.

Hilos invisibles, que a menudo no percibían, ligaban a esos hombres con las ideas de las monarquías constitucionales occidentales, los parlamentos, los cardenales y los obispos más cultos, los industriales, los propietarios de tierras instruidos, los líderes de los sindicatos obreros, los predicadores y los profesores universitarios.

La gran esclava detuvo su mirada —una mirada indagadora, dubitativa— sobre Lenin. Él fue el elegido.

Como en las viejas fábulas, él adivinó su pensamiento secreto, la sacó de su

sueño indeciso.

Pero ¿fue de veras así?

Él fue elegido porque él la había escogido a ella y porque ella lo había escogido a él.

Ella lo siguió —él le había prometido montañas de oro y ríos de vino—, lo siguió primero de buena gana, llena de confianza, por un sendero alegre y embriagante, iluminado por las casas de los grandes propietarios, luego empezó a dar traspiés, a mirar hacia atrás, horrorizada por el camino que se abría ante ella, pero sintiendo cada vez con más fuerza la mano de hierro que la conducía.

Y él avanzaba, lleno de una fe apostólica, arrastrando a Rusia tras de sí, sin comprender que era víctima de una prodigiosa alucinación. En la marcha dócil de ella, en su nueva sumisión después del derrocamiento del zar, en aquella complacencia que hacía perder el juicio, se hundía, se extinguía, se transformaba todo aquello que él había llevado a Rusia del Occidente revolucionario y amante de la libertad.

Tenía la sensación de que su inquebrantable poder dictatorial era el garante de la pureza y la conservación de todo en lo que él creía, de todo lo que había aportado a su país.

Era feliz de tener aquel poder, que identificaba con la justicia de su propia fe; pero de repente, en un instante, vio con horror que la firmeza inquebrantable que utilizaba con la sumisa y dulce Rusia era el signo de su propia impotencia.

Y cuanto más riguroso se hacía su avance, cuanto más pesada era su mano, más se sometía Rusia a la violencia revolucionaria y científica, menor era su energía para luchar contra la fuerza verdaderamente satánica de los antiguos tiempos de servidumbre.

Como un licor viejo de miles de años, el principio de servidumbre se fortaleció en el alma rusa. Como el agua regia, que es fumante por fuerza propia, aquel principio disolvió el metal y la sal de la dignidad humana y transformó la vida espiritual del hombre ruso.

Durante novecientos años las vastas extensiones de Rusia, que proporcionan —a quien tenga una visión superficial de las cosas— una sensación de excitación espiritual, de ardor, de libertad, fueron el alambique mudo de la esclavitud.

Hicieron falta novecientos años para que Rusia saliese de las salvajes zonas forestales, de las isbas sin chimeneas, humeantes, de las casas hechas de troncos y se dirigiese a las fábricas de los Urales, las minas de carbón del Donets, los palacios de San Petersburgo, el Hermitage, las fragatas y las calderas.

Bajo una mirada superficial, a muchos les daba la impresión de un creciente progreso, de que se estaba produciendo un acercamiento a Occidente.

Pero cuanto más se parecía superficialmente la vida a la vida de Occidente, cuanto más recordaban el fragor de sus fábricas, el ruido de las ruedas de las calesas y de los trenes, el chasquido de las velas de sus barcos, la luz cristalina de las ventanas de sus palacios a la vida occidental, más crecía el abismo misterioso que separaba a la vida rusa de la europea.

Aquel abismo consistía en que el desarrollo de Occidente estaba fecundado por el crecimiento de la libertad, mientras que el desarrollo de Rusia estaba fecundado por el crecimiento de la esclavitud.

La historia de la humanidad es la historia de su libertad. El crecimiento de la potencia del hombre se expresa sobre todo en el crecimiento de la libertad. La libertad no es necesidad convertida en conciencia, como pensaba Engels. La libertad es diametralmente opuesta a la necesidad, la libertad es la necesidad superada. El progreso es, en esencia, progreso de la libertad humana. Ya que la vida misma es libertad, la evolución de la vida es la evolución de la libertad.

El desarrollo ruso ha revelado una extraña naturaleza: se ha confundido con el desarrollo de la falta de libertad. Año tras año, la esclavitud de los campesinos se ha vuelto más dura y cruel, cada vez ha ido menguando más su derecho a la tierra; al mismo tiempo, la ciencia rusa, la técnica y la educación estaban en continuo crecimiento, paralelamente al crecimiento de la esclavitud rusa.

El nacimiento del sistema estatal ruso estuvo marcado por la esclavización definitiva de los campesinos, por la supresión del último día de libertad que le quedaba al campesino: el 2.6 de noviembre, día de San Jorge.

Cada vez disminuía más el número de hombres «libres», «errantes», cada vez aumentaba más el número de siervos, y Rusia comenzaba a avanzar por el ancho camino de la historia europea. El campesino ligado primero a la tierra, luego resultó ligado al propietario de la tierra, después al funcionario que representaba al Estado y al ejército; y el propietario recibió el derecho a juzgar a sus siervos, y luego el derecho a someterlos a la tortura de Moscú (así la llamaban hace cuatro siglos): a colgarlos con las manos atadas a la espalda y a fustigarles con un látigo. Entretanto crecía la metalurgia rusa, se ensanchaban los depósitos de cereales, el Estado y el ejército se fortalecían, se inflamaba la aurora de la gloria militar rusa, el alfabetismo se extendía.

La potente actividad de Pedro el Grande, fundador del progreso científico e industrial de Rusia, estaba ligada también a un potente progreso de la servidumbre. Pedro el Grande equiparó a los siervos de la gleba que trabajaban la

tierra con los siervos domésticos, y redujo a la condición de siervos a los campesinos no censados. Sometió a servidumbre a los ciudadanos libres del norte y a los odnodvortsi[38] en el sur. Bajo el reinado de Pedro, a la servidumbre de los terratenientes, se unió la servidumbre del Estado, que favoreció la educación y el progreso. Pedro creía que aproximaba Rusia a Occidente y, en efecto, así fue, pero el abismo entre la libertad y la no libertad cada vez se hacía más profundo.

Así se llegó al espléndido siglo de Catalina II, el siglo del maravilloso florecimiento del arte y la cultura de Rusia, el siglo en que la esclavitud alcanzó su mayor desarrollo.

Fue así, con una cadena milenaria, como el progreso ruso y la esclavitud rusa estaban ligados el uno al otro. Cada escalada hacia la luz ahondaba aún más el negro foso de la esclavitud.

El siglo XIX ocupa un lugar aparte en la historia de Rusia.

En este siglo vaciló el principio básico de la vida rusa: la relación entre progreso y esclavitud.

Los pensadores revolucionarios rusos no midieron la importancia de la emancipación de los siervos en el siglo xix. Ese acontecimiento, como se demostró en el siglo siguiente, era más revolucionario que el acontecimiento de la gran Revolución de Octubre. Ese acontecimiento sacudió los fundamentos milenarios de la vida rusa, fundamentos que ni Pedro ni Lenin tocaron: la dependencia del progreso respecto de la esclavitud.

Después de la liberación de los campesinos, los líderes revolucionarios, la intelligentsia, los estudiantes lucharon tempestuosamente, con una fuerza terrible, con abnegación, por aquella dignidad humana desconocida para Rusia, por el progreso sin esclavitud. Esa nueva ley era completamente extraña al pasado ruso, y nadie sabía qué sería de Rusia si renunciaba al vínculo milenario entre progreso y esclavitud.

En febrero de 1917 se abrió ante Rusia el camino de la libertad. Rusia escogió a Lenin.

Fue enorme la fractura que produjo Lenin en la vida rusa: destruyó por completo el sistema de la propiedad de la tierra, eliminó a los industriales y a los comerciantes.

Y sin embargo toda la historia de Rusia obligó a Lenin, por extraño y grotesco que esto pueda parecer, a conservar la maldición de Rusia, el vínculo entre desarrollo y esclavitud.

Los únicos verdaderos revolucionarios son los que atentan contra los

fundamentos de la vieja Rusia, contra su alma de esclava.

Y así fue como la obsesión revolucionaria, la fe fanática en la autenticidad del marxismo, la total intolerancia hacia aquellos que pensasen de forma diferente llevó a Lenin a favorecer el desarrollo de aquella Rusia que él odiaba con todas las fuerzas de su fanático espíritu.

En efecto, es trágico que un hombre que se deleitaba con los libros de Tolstói y la música de Beethoven contribuyera a una nueva esclavización de campesinos y obreros, a transformar a destacados hombres de la cultura, como Alekséi Tolstói, el químico Semiónov y el músico Shostakovich, en lacayos del Estado.

La disputa iniciada por los partidarios de la libertad rusa llegó a su fin: la esclavitud rusa, una vez más, se reveló invencible.

La victoria de Lenin acabó siendo su derrota.

Pero la tragedia de Lenin no fue sólo una tragedia rusa, fue una tragedia mundial.

¿Había pensado alguna vez Lenin mientras hacía la Revolución que no sólo Rusia no iba a seguir los pasos de la Europa socialista sino que además la esclavitud rusa escondida en ella iba a traspasar las fronteras y a convertirse en la antorcha que iluminara las nuevas vías de la humanidad?

Ahora ya no era Rusia la que se embebía del espíritu libre de Occidente. Era Occidente el que miraba con ojos fascinados el espectáculo del desarrollo ruso avanzando por el penoso sendero de la esclavitud.

El mundo vio la mágica sencillez de aquella vía. El mundo comprendió la fuerza del Estado popular construido sobre la esclavitud.

Parecía que se hubiera cumplido lo que habían predicho los profetas de Rusia ciento cincuenta años antes.

Pero de qué manera tan extraña, espantosa...

La síntesis leninista entre la ausencia de libertad y el socialismo aturdió más al mundo que el descubrimiento de la energía atómica.

Los apóstoles europeos de las revoluciones nacionales vieron la llama que venía del Este. Los italianos, y después los alemanes, empezaron a desarrollar, cada cual a su manera, la idea de un socialismo nacional.

Y la llama se propagó por todos lados: Asia y África se la apropiaron.

Naciones y Estados podían desarrollarse en nombre de la fuerza y contra la libertad.

No era éste alimento para la gente sana; era un narcótico para los desdichados, los enfermos y los débiles, para los atrasados o los vencidos.

La milenaria ley rusa del desarrollo se convirtió, gracias a la voluntad, la pasión y el genio de Lenin, en una ley universal.

Ése fue el destino de la historia.

La intolerancia de Lenin, su perseverancia, su implacabilidad hacia todos aquellos que pensaban diferente a él, su desprecio por la libertad, el fanatismo de su fe, la crueldad para con sus enemigos, todo aquello que dio la victoria a la causa de Lenin, había nacido y se había forjado en los abismos milenarios de la esclavitud rusa, de la no libertad rusa. Por eso la victoria de Lenin sirvió a la no libertad. Y al lado, al mismo tiempo, incorpóreamente, carente de significado, continuaban viviendo aquellos rasgos de un Lenin amable, modesto, de un intelectual ruso dedicado al trabajo que había seducido a millones de personas.

Y ¿entonces? ¿Se trata de la siempre enigmática alma rusa? No, no hay ningún enigma.

Pero ¿lo hubo alguna vez? ¿Qué clase de enigma puede haber en la esclavitud?

Y además, ¿es ésta una ley de desarrollo exclusivamente rusa? ¿Fue sólo el alma rusa la que estuvo condenada a desarrollarse a la par que la esclavitud y no que la libertad?

No, claro que no.

Esa ley está determinada por los parámetros —hay decenas de ellos, tal vez centenares— de la historia de Rusia.

No se trata del alma. Si los franceses, los alemanes, los italianos o los ingleses hubiesen echado raíces hace miles de años en estos mismos parámetros —en los bosques y en la estepa, en los cenagales y en las llanuras, en el campo de fuerzas entre Europa y Asia, en la trágica inmensidad rusa—, el curso de la historia se habría desarrollado según las mismas leyes. Por otra parte, los rusos no fueron los únicos que conocieron ese camino. No son pocos los pueblos en todos los continentes que han conocido —de cerca y claramente, o de lejos y vagamente— lo amargo de la vida rusa en toda su crudeza.

Ha llegado el momento de que los adivinos que predijeron el futuro de Rusia comprendan que sólo la esclavitud milenaria ha creado la mística del alma rusa.

En la admiración de la ascética pureza bizantina y de la docilidad cristiana del alma rusa vive el reconocimiento involuntario del carácter inquebrantable de la

esclavitud rusa. Esa docilidad cristiana, esa ascética pureza bizantina —al igual que la pasión, la intolerancia, la fanática fe de Lenin— tienen un mismo origen: la milenaria ausencia de libertad del pueblo ruso.

Aquí está el trágico error de los profetas rusos. Pero ¿dónde está el alma rusa «universal y panhumanista» sobre la cual Dostoyevski había predicho que «pronunciaría las palabras definitivas de la gran armonía general, de la concordia fraternal definitiva de todos los pueblos según la ley evangélica de Cristo»?

Pero ¿dónde está, Señor, esa alma universal y panhumanista? ¿Acaso pensaban los profetas de Rusia que combinando el rechinamiento de las alambradas de la taiga siberiana y del campo de Auschwitz se cumplirían sus profecías sobre el futuro y el triunfo sagrado del alma rusa?

Lenin es, en muchos aspectos, opuesto a los profetas rusos. Está infinitamente alejado de sus ideas, de la docilidad y la pureza del cristianismo bizantino, de la ley evangélica. Pero al mismo tiempo, por extraño que pueda parecer, está cerca de ellos. Aun recorriendo un camino completamente diferente, el suyo propio, Lenin no trató de proteger a Rusia de los milenarios cenagales insondables de la esclavitud; como ellos, reconoció el carácter inquebrantable de la esclavitud rusa. Como ellos, él nació de nuestra esclavitud.

El alma esclava que se esconde en el alma rusa vive en la fe rusa y en la ausencia de fe rusa, en el dulce humanitarismo, en la temeridad, el vandalismo, la audacia, en la tacañería y la mezquindad, en la paciente capacidad para el trabajo, en la pureza ascética, en el talento para defraudar, en el temible arrojo de los guerreros rusos, en la ausencia de dignidad humana, en la revuelta desesperada de los rebeldes rusos, en el frenesí de los sectarios. Y esta alma esclava se encuentra también en la revolución de Lenin, en la apasionada receptividad de Lenin de las doctrinas revolucionarias de Occidente, en la obsesión, en la violencia de Lenin y en las victorias del Estado leninista.

Dondequiera que exista esclavitud en el mundo, allí nacen almas parecidas.

¿Qué esperanza le queda a Rusia si ni siquiera sus profetas distinguen la libertad de la esclavitud?

¿Qué esperanza le queda si el genio de Rusia ve la belleza dulce y luminosa del alma rusa en su obediente esclavitud?

¿Qué esperanza le queda a Rusia si el más grande de sus reformadores, Lenin, no destruyó sino que reforzó el lazo entre progreso y esclavitud?

¿Cuándo será libre y humana el alma de Rusia? ¿Cuándo llegará ese día?

Tal vez ese momento nunca llegue.

LENIN murió. Pero el leninismo no murió. El poder conquistado por Lenin no se escapó de las manos del Partido. Los camaradas de Lenin, sus colaboradores, sus compañeros de lucha y sus discípulos continuaron su obra.

... aquellos en cuyas manos dejó el país

en un desbordamiento convulso

lo deben aprisionar en cemento.

A ellos no les dirás: Lenin ha muerto,

su muerte no les desalentó.

Siguieron cumpliendo su empresa,

con más tesón todavía...

La dictadura del Partido que Lenin había instaurado perduró después de su muerte al igual que perduraron los ejércitos, la milicia, la Cheká, las organizaciones para la liquidación del analfabetismo y las universidades obreras. A su muerte, dejó una obra de veintiocho volúmenes. ¿Cuál de sus compañeros de lucha sabrá, de manera más completa y profunda, expresar por su carácter su corazón, su cerebro la esencia verdadera del leninismo? ¿Quién recibirá la bandera de Lenin? ¿Quién la levantará? ¿Quién construirá el gran Estado fundado por Lenin? ¿Quién guiará de victoria en victoria a este partido de nuevo tipo? ¿Quién consolidará el nuevo orden sobre la tierra?

¿El brillante, el impetuoso, el magnífico Trotski? ¿El fascinante Bujarin, teórico dotado de un excepcional espíritu de síntesis? ¿Ríkov, el hombre con ojos

de vaca, el político más próximo a los intereses del pueblo, a los campesinos y a los obreros? ¿Kámenev, capacitado para librar cualquier batalla, por complicada que fuese, ejercitado en la dirección del Estado, instruido y seguro de sí mismo? ¿Zinóviev, el mejor especialista del movimiento obrero internacional, el polemista-duelista de la clase internacional?

Cada uno de ellos, por carácter o por espíritu, estaba próximo, en consonancia con uno u otro rasgo, al carácter de Lenin. Pero resultó que aquellos rasgos no constituían la esencia del carácter de Lenin. No eran esos rasgos los que habían determinado la naturaleza del mundo que estaba naciendo.

Fatídicamente, todos los rasgos del carácter de Lenin que se hallaban en el casi genial Trotski, en Bujarin, Ríkov, Zinóviev, Kámenev resultaron ser rasgos de un espíritu sedicioso: llevaron a todos sus exponentes al paredón, a la perdición.

Aquellos rasgos, lejos de expresar la esencia del carácter de Lenin, revelaban su debilidad, su espíritu sedicioso, sus extravagancias.

Lunacharski se parecía a un cierto Lenin, al que escuchaba la Appassionata y se deleitaba con Guerra y paz. Pero no era a aquel pobre diablo de Lunacharski a quien le correspondería cumplir con severidad y rudeza la gran empresa del Partido de Lenin.

No fue ni a Trotski ni a Bujarin, Ríkov, Kámenev y Zinóviev a quienes el destino asignó la tarea de expresar la verdadera naturaleza, la esencia secreta de Lenin.

El odio de Stalin hacia los líderes de la oposición era su odio hacia aquellos rasgos del carácter de Lenin que contradecían la esencia del propio Lenin.

Stalin ajustició a los amigos más íntimos y a los compañeros de armas de Lenin porque impedían, cada uno a su manera, que se realizara el verdadero leninismo.

Luchando contra ellos, ajusticiándolos, era como si también luchase contra Lenin, lo ajusticiase. Pero al mismo tiempo fue justamente él quien afirmó la victoria de Lenin y del leninismo, quien levantó y plantó en Rusia la bandera de Lenin.

EL nombre de Stalin está inscrito para la eternidad en la historia de Rusia.

Mirando a Stalin, la Rusia posrevolucionaria se conoció a sí misma.

Los veintiocho volúmenes de las obras de Lenin —discursos, informes, programas, análisis económicos y filosóficos— no sirvieron a Rusia para conocerse a sí misma, para conocer su destino. La combinación de revolución occidental con la estructura específica del desarrollo ruso provocó un caos superior al babilónico.

No sólo los marineros y la caballería de Budioni, no sólo los campesinos y los obreros rusos sino también el propio Lenin había sido incapaz de comprender lo que verdaderamente pasaba. El rugido de la tormenta revolucionaria, las leyes de la dialéctica materialista, la lógica de El Capital se mezclaron con el sonido del acordeón, canciones como La manzana o El pollo frito[39], el zumbido de los aparatos para la destilación casera del vodka, la llamada de conferenciantes y propagandistas exhortando a los marineros y a los estudiantes de las universidades populares a no ceder a la herejía ponzoñosa de Kautsky, Cunow, Hilderfing.

El fuego, la revuelta, el desenfreno de los que Rusia fue presa levantaron del fondo del caldero ruso el fardo de ofensas y rencores acumulados durante siglos de sufrimiento de un pueblo esclavizado.

Del romanticismo de la Revolución, de la locura del Proletkult[40], de las verdes repúblicas del aguardiente casero, de la temeridad ebria y de las revueltas campesinas, de la furia de los marineros del Alntaz surgió un nuevo y poderoso intendente de policía que Rusia nunca antes había visto.

El deseo apasionado del pueblo por hacerse dueño de la tierra cultivable, que Lenin había entendido y estimulado, era incompatible con el Estado que él había fundado. La vieja aspiración del pueblo a ser dueño de la tierra fue suprimida con firmeza.

En 1930 el Estado fundado por Lenin se convirtió en propietario absoluto de todas las tierras, aguas y bosques de la Unión Soviética, privando así a los campesinos del derecho a poseer la tierra cultivable.

La confusión, las contradicciones y la niebla no sólo reinaban en los nudos ferroviarios, los embarcaderos y los techos de los convoyes, no sólo en las aspiraciones de los campesinos y en las cabezas inflamadas de los poetas, sino

también en la teoría revolucionaria que estaba en total contradicción con la práctica, con las nuevas construcciones, cristalinamente claras, del primer teórico del Partido.

El principal eslogan de Lenin era «Todo el poder para los soviets», pero el curso posterior de la vida demostró que los soviets creados por él no tenían ningún poder y nunca lo tendrían: son instancias puramente formales, simples órganos de ejecución burocrática.

Todo el entusiasmo teórico del joven Lenin se dirigió a la lucha contra el populismo, el socialismo revolucionario, a intentar probar que Rusia no podría evitar el proceso de desarrollo capitalista. En 1917 todo el empuje de Lenin se empleó en demostrar que Rusia podía y debía seguir el camino de la revolución proletaria evitando la vía capitalista ligada a las libertades democráticas.

¿Podía imaginarse Lenin que, fundando la Internacional Comunista y proclamando en el segundo congreso del Komintern el eslogan de la revolución mundial, «Proletarios del mundo, unios», estaba abonando el terreno para un desarrollo del principio de la soberanía nacional sin precedentes en la historia?

La potencia del nacionalismo estatal y el nacionalismo desaforado de las masas privadas de libertad y dignidad humana se convirtieron en la principal palanca, en la cabeza termonuclear del nuevo orden, y decidieron el destino del siglo xx.

Stalin hizo sentar la cabeza a la Rusia posrevolucionaria, dio a cada hermana pendientes de plata[41], y a los que no consideraba dignos de llevar pendientes se los arrancó al mismo tiempo que las orejas o la cabeza.

El Partido bolchevique estaba destinado a ser el Partido del Estado nacional. La fusión del Partido y el Estado encontró su expresión en la persona de Stalin. En el carácter, en el espíritu, en la voluntad de Stalin el Estado manifestó su carácter, su voluntad, su inteligencia.

Stalin parecía construir a su propia imagen y semejanza el Estado fundado por Lenin. Pero no era así, naturalmente: era la imagen de Stalin la que estaba hecha a semejanza del Estado y precisamente por eso se convirtió en el amo.

Pero está claro que, a veces, especialmente al final de su vida, creyó que el Estado era su servidor.

En el carácter de Stalin, en el que el asiático se fundía con el marxista europeo, se expresaba el carácter del sistema estatal soviético. ¡Sí, el sistema estatal! Lenin encarnaba el principio nacional ruso histórico, Stalin, el sistema estatal ruso soviético. El sistema estatal ruso —nacido en Asia, pero vestido en Europa— no es

histórico sino suprahistórico.

Su principio es universal, inquebrantable, aplicable a todos los regímenes de Rusia a lo largo de su historia milenaria. Con ayuda de Stalin, categorías revolucionarias tales como dictadura, terror, lucha contra las libertades burguesas —heredadas de Lenin y que éste consideraba categorías temporales y transitorias— se transformaron en la base, el fundamento y la esencia, se aliaron con la esclavitud rusa tradicional, nacional, milenaria. Con la ayuda de Stalin, esas categorías se convirtieron en la sustancia del Estado mientras que las reminiscencias socialdemocráticas quedaron relegadas a la forma, a decorado de teatro.

Stalin reunió en sí todos los rasgos de la Rusia de servidumbre que ignoraba la piedad hacia los seres humanos.

En su increíble crueldad, en su increíble perfidia, en su capacidad de fingir y aparentar, en su carácter rencoroso y vengativo, en su grosería y su humor, se vislumbraba al tirano asiático.

En sus conocimientos de las doctrinas revolucionarias, en el uso de la terminología del Occidente progresista, en el conocimiento de la literatura y el teatro, apreciado por la ititelligentsia democrática rusa, en sus citas de Gógol y Schedrín, en su habilidad para utilizar los más refinados procedimientos de la conspiración, en su amoralidad se expresaba el revolucionario de tipo Necháyev para quien el fin justifica los medios. Pero Necháyev se habría estremecido al ver hasta qué monstruoso extremo Iósif Stalin había desarrollado el nechayevismo.

Su confianza en el burocratismo y en la fuerza policial, fuerza principal de la vida, su secreta pasión por los uniformes y las condecoraciones, su desprecio sin parangón hacia la dignidad humana, su divinización del funcionariado y la burocracia, su disposición a matar a un ser humano en nombre del texto sagrado de la ley para, inmediatamente después, despreciar la ley con una arbitrariedad monstruosa, todos estos aspectos componen un personaje policial, un gendarme.

El carácter de Stalin estaba compuesto por la unión de tres personajes.

Esos tres Stalin fueron los que crearon el sistema estatal estalinista, un sistema en el que la ley es sólo un instrumento de la arbitrariedad y la arbitrariedad es la ley; un sistema que hunde sus raíces milenarias en la servidumbre, que transformó a los mujiks en esclavos, sujetos al yugo tártaro; un sistema que transformó en esclavos a aquellos que reinaban sobre los mujiks; un sistema estatal que limita por un lado con el Asia pérfida, vengativa, hipócrita y cruel, y por otro con la Europa ilustrada, democrática, mercantil y sobornable.

Ese asiático con botas de cabritilla —que cita Schedrín y que vivía según las

leyes de la venganza sanguinaria, y que empleando el vocabulario de la Revolución, introdujo claridad en el caos de Octubre— realizó y expresó su propio carácter en el carácter del Estado.

Y el Estado que él construyó tuvo como principio elemental ser un Estado sin libertad.

En este país las fábricas gigantescas, los mares artificiales, los canales, las centrales hidroeléctricas no sirven al hombre sino al Estado sin libertad.

En este Estado el hombre no siembra lo que quiere sembrar, el hombre no es propietario de los campos que trabaja, no es dueño de los manzanos y la leche; la tierra da frutos siguiendo las instrucciones del Estado, sin libertad.

En este Estado, no sólo los pequeños pueblos, tampoco el pueblo ruso tiene libertad nacional. Allí donde no hay libertad humana no puede haber libertad nacional, ya que la libertad nacional es sobre todo libertad del hombre.

En este Estado no hay sociedad, puesto que la sociedad se basa en la libre intimidad y en el libre antagonismo de la gente, y en un Estado sin libertad, libertad de intimidad y libertad de antagonismo son inconcebibles.

El principio milenario según el cual el desarrollo de la cultura, la ciencia y la potencia industrial se obtenía a la par que crecía la ausencia de libertad —principio puesto en práctica por la Rusia de los boyardos, Iván el Terrible, Pedro el Grande y Catalina II— alcanzó su victoria plena con Stalin.

Y es verdaderamente sorprendente que Stalin, aun habiendo aniquilado por completo la libertad, siguiera teniéndole miedo. Tal vez fuese aquel miedo el que hizo que Stalin mostrara una hipocresía sin precedentes.

La hipocresía de Stalin expresaba claramente la hipocresía de su Estado. La expresaba sobre todo en su manera de jugar a la libertad. ¡El Estado no escupió sobre la libertad muerta! El contenido infinitamente precioso, vivo, radiactivo de la libertad y de la democracia fue asesinado y transformado en un animal disecado, en cáscara de palabras. Los salvajes a cuyas manos van a parar delicadísimos sextantes y cronómetros, ¿acaso no los utilizan como adornos?

Así pasó con la libertad. La libertad asesinada se convirtió en un ornamento para el Estado, pero un ornamento que no era inútil. La libertad muerta se convirtió en el primer actor de una gigantesca puesta en escena, de una representación teatral de unas dimensiones jamás antes vistas. El Estado sin libertad creó una maqueta del parlamento, las elecciones, los sindicatos, una maqueta de la sociedad y la vida pública. En aquel Estado sin libertad las maquetas de las direcciones de los koljoses, de las direcciones de las uniones de

escritores y pintores, las maquetas de los presidiums de los comités ejecutivos regionales y de distrito, las maquetas de los despachos y las sesiones plenarias de los comités de distrito, regionales y centrales de los partidos comunistas nacionales, discutían las cuestiones y tomaban decisiones ya decididas de antemano en otro lugar. Incluso el presidium del Comité Central del Partido era un teatro.

Ese teatro estaba presente en el carácter de Stalin. Y estaba igualmente presente en el carácter de aquel Estado sin libertad. He aquí la razón por la cual el Estado necesitaba un Stalin que, a través de su propio carácter, realizara el carácter del Estado.

¿Qué era realidad y qué teatro? ¿Quién tomaba decisiones de verdad y no hacía como que las tomaba?

La fuerza real era Stalin. Era él quien decidía. Pero naturalmente, no podía decidir personalmente todos los problemas del Estado: ¿había que concederle unas vacaciones a la maestra Semiónova?

¿Qué había que sembrar en el koljós Aurora, guisantes o col?

Pues bien, el principio del Estado sin libertad exigía que fuese Stalin el que decidiera todas las cuestiones sin excepción. Pero era materialmente imposible, y eran los hombres de confianza de Stalin los que decidían las cuestiones secundarias y siempre de la misma manera: guiados por el espíritu de Stalin.

Sólo por esta razón eran los hombres de confianza de Stalin, o los hombres de confianza de sus hombres de confianza. Sus decisiones tenían un rasgo en común: fuera cual fuese la cuestión sobre la cual debían pronunciarse, ya se tratara de la construcción de una central hidroeléctrica en el curso inferior del Volga o del envío de la ordeñadora Aniuta Feoktistova a un curso de dos meses, todo se decidía según el espíritu de Stalin. Y lo esencial era que el espíritu de Stalin y el espíritu del Estado eran una sola cosa.

Los hombres de confianza de Stalinstado se reconocían al instante, en cualquier reunión, asamblea, sesión o congreso: nadie discutía nunca con ellos porque ellos hablaban en nombre de Stalinstado.

El hecho de que el Estado sin libertad actuara siempre en nombre de la libertad y de la democracia, que tuviese miedo de dar un paso sin mencionarla, atestigua la fuerza de la libertad. Stalin temía a poca gente pero constantemente, hasta el fin de sus días, le tuvo miedo a la libertad. Después de haberla matado, adulaba su cadáver.

Es errónea la opinión de que lo que ocurrió durante la colectivización total y

bajo Yezhov fue la manifestación delirante de un poder sin límites ni control ejercido por un hombre cruel.

En realidad, la sangre derramada eni93oyi937 era indispensable para el Estado. Como decía Stalin, esa sangre no fue derramada en balde. Sin esa sangre el Estado no habría sobrevivido. La no libertad derramó esa sangre para vencer a la libertad. Es una vieja historia. Comenzó en tiempos de Lenin.

La libertad fue vencida no sólo en el terreno de la política y la actividad pública. La libertad fue aplastada en la agricultura: en el derecho a sembrar y cosechar libremente; fue vencida en la poesía o la filosofía, en el oficio de zapatero, en los círculos de lectura, en los cambios de domicilio, en el trabajo de los obreros cuyas normas de producción, condiciones de seguridad técnica y de salario se determinaban únicamente según la voluntad del Estado.

La ausencia de libertad triunfó plenamente, desde el océano Pacífico hasta el mar Negro. Estaba en todas partes y en todas las cosas. Y en todas partes y en todas las cosas la libertad había sido asesinada.

Fue una ofensiva victoriosa que era imposible llevar a cabo sin derramar mucha sangre: la libertad es vida y, matando la libertad, Stalin mataba la vida.

El carácter de Stalin se expresó en los gigantescos planes quinquenales; esas pirámides retumbantes del siglo XX que correspondían a los palacios y los monumentos suntuosos de la antigüedad asiática y que cautivaban el alma de Stalin. Esas gigantescas construcciones no servían al hombre, así como los gigantescos templos y las mezquitas tampoco servían a Dios.

El carácter de Stalin se manifestó con una fuerza particular en la actividad de los órganos de seguridad creados por él.

Las torturas durante los interrogatorios, la actividad destructora de la opríchnina[42] que tenía como misión aniquilar no sólo a las personas sino también las clases sociales, los métodos policiales que no dejaron de evolucionar desde Maliuta Skurátov[43] hasta el conde Benckendorff encontraron sus equivalentes en el alma de Stalin, en las actividades del aparato represivo creado por él.

Pero sin duda esos equivalentes fueron particularmente funestos porque en la naturaleza de Stalin el principio revolucionario ruso iba estrechamente unido al principio de la policía secreta rusa, desenfrenada y todopoderosa.

Esa fusión de revolución y policía, que se había obrado en la naturaleza de Stalin y se había reflejado en los órganos de seguridad que él mismo creó, tenían su prototipo en el Estado ruso.

La asociación de Degáyev —intelectual, miembro de Naródnaya Volia y

posteriormente agente de la Ojrana— con el entonces jefe de la policía, el coronel Sudeikin, tuvo lugar en los años en que Iósif Dzhugashvili[44] era aún un niño; éste fue el prototipo de aquella alianza monstruosa.

Sudeikin, hombre astuto, escéptico, que conocía bien y apreciaba la fuerza revolucionaria de Rusia y contemplaba con aire burlón la mezquindad del zar y sus ministros para los que trabajaba, utilizó a Degáyev con fines policiales. Degáyev, miembro de Naródnaya Volia, sirvió al mismo tiempo a la Revolución y a la policía.

Pero los planes de Sudeikin no estaban destinados a cumplirse. Quería aprovecharse de la Revolución, primero favoreciéndola, después propagando infundios, montando falsos complots; asustaría al zar, alcanzaría el poder, se convertiría en dictador. Y una vez llegara a la cabeza del Estado, destruiría por completo la Revolución. Pero sus sueños insolentes no se realizaron. Degáyev mató a Sudeikin.

Fue Stalin quien venció. Dentro de su victoria vivía, en un rinconcito, a escondidas de todo el mundo y de él mismo, la victoria que Sudeikin había soñado: atar al carro del Estado dos caballos, la Revolución y la policía secreta.

Stalin, que había nacido de la Revolución, ajustó cuentas con los revolucionarios y con la Revolución con ayuda del aparato policial.

Tal vez la manía persecutoria que tanto lo atormentaba provenía del miedo secreto de Sudeikin a Degáyev, oculto en su subconsciente. Aun domado y sujeto a la Tercera Sección, el revolucionario de Naródnaya Volia inspiraba terror al coronel de la policía. Y lo más espantoso es que los dos, Sudeikin y Degáyev —amigos, enemigos, traicionándose entre sí—, vivían juntos en las tinieblas estrechas del alma de Stalin.

Tal vez allí, o no muy lejos de allí, se halle la explicación a uno de los enigmas que más desconcertó a los hombres que vivieron los acontecimientos de 1937: ¿para qué hacía falta, al destruir a gente inocente, devota de la Revolución, elaborar detalladísimos guiones, falsos de principio a fin, sobre su participación en complots inventados, inexistentes?

Con atroces torturas, que se prolongaban durante días, semanas, meses y a veces años, los órganos de seguridad obligaban a desdichados contables, ingenieros o agrónomos al límite de sus fuerzas a participar en representaciones teatrales, a interpretar el papel de los malos, agentes del extranjero, terroristas, saboteadores.

¿Para qué hicieron todo eso? Millones de personas se lo han preguntado millones de veces.

Después de todo, Sudeikin, cuando preparaba sus puestas en escena, se proponía engañar al zar. Pero Stalin no tenía necesidad de engañar al zar porque él era el zar.

Sí, es cierto, y sin embargo Stalin aspiraba a engañar a aquel zar que, muy a su pesar, invisible, vivía en la secreta oscuridad de su alma.

El invisible señor y soberano de su alma continuaba viviendo en todas partes, allí donde aparentemente la ausencia de libertad triunfaba plenamente. Sólo él logró aterrorizar a Stalin hasta el fin de sus días.

Y hasta el fin de sus días Stalin fue incapaz, ni siquiera con su sanguinaria violencia, de acabar con la libertad, aquella libertad en nombre de la cual había empezado la Revolución rusa de Febrero.

Y el asiático que vivía en el alma de Stalin se esforzaba en engañar a la libertad, usaba astucias contra ella y se desesperaba por no poder liquidarla.

25

DESPUÉS de la muerte de Stalin, la obra de Stalin no murió, de la misma manera que no había muerto, en su momento, la obra de Lenin.

El Estado sin libertad construido por Stalin aún vive. La potencia de la industria, de las fuerzas armadas, de los órganos represivos todavía está en manos del Partido. La ausencia de libertad impera, como antes, de mar a mar. La ley del teatro no ha sufrido el más mínimo tambaleo, lo invade todo: el sistema electoral funciona del mismo modo, los sindicatos obreros siguen encadenados como esclavos; los campesinos están privados de libertad y de pasaporte interno, la intelligentsia del gran país trabaja, hace ruido, zumba diligentemente en las antesalas del poder. El Estado se gobierna apretando un botón, y el poder de la persona que presiona el botón es ilimitado.

Pero, naturalmente, han cambiado muchas cosas. No podían no cambiar, era inevitable.

El Estado sin libertad ha entrado en su tercera fase: Lenin lo fundó, Stalin lo construyó y ahora, en la tercera fase, se ha puesto en marcha, como dicen los constructores.

Muchas cosas que eran necesarias durante la fase de construcción se han vuelto inútiles. Ha pasado el tiempo en que lo más importante era demoler las casas viejas y pequeñas que se encontraban en un solar y en que se expulsaba, trasplantaba, exterminaba a los habitantes de las villas en ruinas, de las casitas, casuchas y casonas abandonadas.

Nuevos inquilinos pueblan ahora el rascacielos que las sustituye. Cierto, quedan muchas cosas por acabar, pero no es necesario recurrir continuamente a los métodos destructivos del anterior jefe de obra, el viejo dueño.

Los cimientos del rascacielos —la ausencia de libertad— son, como antes, inquebrantables.

¿Qué ocurrirá más adelante? ¿Los cimientos son verdaderamente inquebrantables? ¿Tiene razón Hegel? ¿De veras todo lo que es real es racional? ¿Es real lo inhumano? ¿Es racional?

La fuerza de la revolución popular, iniciada en febrero de 1917, era tan grande que ni siquiera el Estado dictatorial logró sofocarla. Y mientras el Estado seguía su curso implacable, según las leyes del crecimiento y la acumulación,

llevaba en las entrañas, sin saberlo siquiera, la libertad.

En la oscuridad más profunda, en hondo secreto, la libertad se iba realizando, mientras que en la superficie de la tierra corría rápidamente un río, llevándose todo cuanto encontraba a su paso. El nuevo Estado nacional, propietario de todos los tesoros, tesoros incalculables —fábricas, plantas industriales, centrales atómicas, todas las tierras—, indiscutible señor de toda criatura viviente, celebra la victoria. Parecía que la Revolución se hubiese llevado a cabo por él, por su poder, que debía durar miles de años, por su triunfo. Pero el señor y el patrón de medio mundo no era sólo el sepulturero de la libertad.

La libertad se iba realizando a despecho del genio de Lenin, creador inspirado del nuevo mundo; se iba realizando porque los seres humanos continuaban siendo seres humanos.

Los hombres que hicieron la Revolución de Febrero de 1917, los hombres que construyeron por indicación del nuevo Estado los rascacielos, las fábricas y las pilas atómicas, no tenían otro objetivo que la libertad. Porque al crear el nuevo mundo, el ser humano seguía siendo ser humano.

Iván Grigórievich sentía y comprendía todo eso, a veces claramente, otras de manera confusa.

Por enormes que sean los rascacielos y potentes los cañones, por ilimitado que sea el poder del Estado e imponentes los imperios, todo eso no es más que humo y niebla que desaparecerá. Lo que permanece, se desarrolla y vive es sólo una verdadera fuerza, que consiste en una sola cosa: la libertad. Vivir significa ser un hombre libre. No todo lo real es racional. Todo lo que es inhumano es absurdo e inútil.

A Iván Grigórievich no le sorprendía que la palabra «libertad» estuviese en sus labios cuando, de estudiante, fue a parar a Siberia, que la palabra viviese en él y que ahora tampoco hubiese desaparecido de su cabeza.

26

ESTABA solo en la habitación, pero formulaba sus pensamientos como si conversara con Anna Serguéyevna.

... ¿Sabes? En los momentos más duros me imaginaba los abrazos de una mujer, pensaba en lo buenos que son, que en esos abrazos encuentras el olvido, no te acuerdas de los sufrimientos, como si no hubieran existido. Y ves, es a ti justamente a quien debo contarte lo que más me ha pesado, y tú también has hablado conmigo, toda la noche. Sí, felicidad es compartir contigo este peso que con nadie más podría compartir. Cuando vuelvas del hospital te contaré el momento más terrible de mi vida: la conversación que tuve en una celda, al amanecer, poco después de un interrogatorio. A mi lado dormía alguien que ya no está entre nosotros, murió entonces, Alekséi Samóilovich. Creo que es la persona más inteligente que nunca he conocido. Pero su inteligencia me daba miedo. No digo que fuese una inteligencia mala: la maldad en sí misma no da miedo... Su inteligencia no era mala, sino cínica, muy burlona para con los que tenían fe. Me daba miedo, pero a la vez me atraía, no podía dominarlo. No logré hacer que compartiera mi fe en la libertad.

Su vida había tomado un mal rumbo. Por lo demás, era una vida como cualquier otra, nada en particular. Lo habían arrestado y condenado por el artículo 58—10, como a la mayoría de los presos.

Pero tenía una mente potente. Su pensamiento te arrastraba como una ola, y yo incluso me estremecía como se estremece la tierra cuando la embiste una ola del océano.

Había vuelto a la celda después de un interrogatorio. Qué larga es la lista de la violencia: hogueras, prisiones, técnicas de exterminio, fortalezas carcelarias de varias plantas, campos de concentración enormes como ciudades. Al principio la pena máxima se ejecutaba con una maza, que te hundía el cráneo, y con la soga. Hoy el verdugo acciona un interruptor y ejecuta a cien, mil, diez mil hombres. Ya no necesita blandir un hacha. Nuestro siglo es el siglo en que la violencia que el Estado ejerce sobre el hombre ha alcanzado su cota más alta. Pero en esto reside precisamente la fuerza y la esperanza del ser humano: es el siglo xx el que ha hecho tambalearse el principio hegeliano del proceso histórico mundial: «Todo lo real es racional», principio arduamente debatido durante décadas y que finalmente

fue aceptado por los pensadores rusos del siglo xx. Pero es precisamente ahora, en la época del triunfo de la potencia del Estado sobre la libertad del hombre, es ahora cuando, volcando la ley hegeliana, los pensadores rusos, embutidos en sus chaquetones de los campos de prisioneros, enuncian el principio supremo de la historia mundial: «Todo lo inhumano es absurdo e inútil».

Sí, sí, sí, en el momento del triunfo más completo de la inhumanidad se ha hecho evidente que todo lo creado por medio de la violencia resulta finalmente absurdo e inútil, no tiene futuro, desaparecerá sin dejar rastro.

Ésta es mi fe, y con dicha fe había vuelto a la celda. Como de costumbre, me dijo mi vecino:

—¿Para qué defender la libertad? Ha pasado el tiempo en que la gente veía en ella la ley y la razón del progreso. Pero ahora —dice— todo está claro: en general, no hay progreso histórico, la historia es un proceso molecular, el hombre es siempre idéntico, no hay nada que hacer, no hay desarrollo. Pero existe una ley sencilla: la ley de la conservación de la violencia. Sencilla como la ley de la conservación de la energía. La violencia es eterna; por mucho que se haga para destruirla no desaparece, no disminuye, sólo se transforma. Ahora toma la forma de esclavitud, ahora de invasión mongola. Salta de un continente a otro, se transforma en lucha de clases y de lucha de clases en lucha de razas, ahora de la esfera material se traslada a la religiosidad medieval, ahora la emprende con la gente de color, ahora con los escritores y los artistas; pero en general sobre la Tierra siempre hay la misma cantidad de violencia. El caos de sus transformaciones es interpretado por los pensadores como una evolución, motivo por el cual buscan sus leyes. Pero el caos no tiene leyes ni desarrollo, ni significado ni objetivo. He aquí a Gógol, genio de Rusia, que cantó al «pájaro—troika». En su carrera presagiaba el futuro; pero no es en la troika que Gógol presagiaba donde se hallaba el futuro sino en otra troika: el destino burocrático de Rusia, la troika sin rostro que formaban los tres jueces de las comisiones especiales. La troika que condenaba al fusilamiento, confeccionaba las listas de los campesinos que tenían que ser deskulakizados, expulsaba a un joven de la universidad, privaba de cupones para el pan a una anciana de origen noble.

Y ahí está en su litera, mi compañero, amenazando a Gógol con el dedo:

—Usted está equivocado, Nikolái Vasílievich, no lo ha entendido, no ha visto con claridad nuestro pájaro-troika. La historia de los hombres no está en la carrera de la troika sino en el caos, en el eterno paso de una forma de violencia a otra. Vuela, el pájaro-troika, y todo permanece inmóvil, todo está estático; y sobre todo permanece inmóvil el hombre, permanece inmóvil su destino. La violencia es eterna, se haga lo que se haga para destruirla. Y la troika vuela, no le importa el

sufrimiento ruso. Y a la inversa, ¿qué le importa al sufrimiento de Rusia si aquélla vuela o permanece inmóvil?

Está claro que no es la troika de Gógol sino la otra troika la que firma las sentencias a la pena capital... ahí estoy, acostado en la litera, medio muerto, y siento que en mí sólo queda viva mi fe: la historia de los hombres es la historia de la libertad, de la más pequeña a la más grande; la historia de toda la vida, desde la ameba hasta el género humano, es la historia de la libertad, es el paso de una libertad menor a otra libertad mayor; que la vida en sí misma es libertad. Esa fe me da fuerzas, palpo la preciosa, espléndida, luminosa idea escondida en mis andrajos carcelarios: «Todo lo que es inhumano es absurdo e inútil».

Y Alekséi Samóilovich me escucha a mí, medio muerto, y me dice:

—La tuya es una mentira confortante; la historia de la vida no es más que una historia de invencible violencia, eterna e indestructible, que se transforma pero no desaparece ni disminuye. La palabra «historia» es una invención de los hombres: la historia no existe, la historia es como moler agua en un mortero, el hombre no evoluciona de lo ínfimo a lo supremo, el hombre está inmóvil como un bloque de granito; su bondad, su inteligencia, su libertad son inamovibles; lo humano no crece en el hombre. ¿Qué clase de historia es la del hombre si su bondad no puede crecer?

¿Sabes?, entonces sentí que no podía haber nada más duro que aquellos minutos. Estaba allí, acostado en la litera, y pensaba: «Dios mío, cómo es posible; precisamente de un hombre inteligente me viene este dolor insoportable: una condena a muerte, eso es». Respirar se me hacía insoportable. Sólo tenía un deseo: no ver, no oír, no respirar. Morir. Pero el alivio me llegó del lugar más insospechado: me arrastraron de nuevo al interrogatorio, no me dejaron cobrar aliento siquiera. Y me sentí aliviado. Creo que la libertad es ineludible. Al diablo el pájaro—troika, que vuela, truena y firma sentencias... Un día, libertad y Rusia serán una misma cosa.

Tú no me escuchas... ¿Cuándo, cuándo volverás del hospital? ¿Cuándo volverás a mí?

Un día de invierno, Iván Grigorievich acompañó a Anna Serguéyevna al cementerio. No le fue dado compartir con ella todo lo que había recordado, meditado, escrito durante los meses de su enfermedad.

Llevó al pueblo las pertenencias de la difunta, pasó el día con Aliosha y después volvió a su trabajo en el artel.

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EN verano Iván Grigorievich partió hacia la ciudad costera donde, al pie de la verde montaña, estaba la casa de su padre.

El tren corría junto a la orilla, y durante una breve parada Iván Grigorievich bajó del vagón para mirar el agua verde y negra en continuo movimiento, que olía a frescor salado.

El mar y el viento existían cuando el juez instructor lo había convocado para el interrogatorio nocturno, cuando cavaban la fosa para un zek muerto durante el viaje de deportación, y cuando los perros policía ladraban bajo las ventanas del barracón y la nieve crujía bajo los pies de los guardias del campo.

El mar es eterno, y aquella eterna libertad suya a Iván Grigorievich se le antojaba bastante similar a la indiferencia. Al mar le daba lo mismo Iván Grigorievich cuando la vida de éste transcurría mucho más allá del círculo polar, y a su retumbante y revoltosa libertad le daría exactamente lo mismo el día que él dejara de vivir. Y pensó: «Esto no es la libertad, es un simple espacio astronómico que ha venido a la Tierra, un fragmento de eternidad, móvil e indiferente».

El mar no es la libertad. Es su imagen, su símbolo. ¡Qué hermosa es la libertad si basta con evocarla para que su imagen llene de felicidad al hombre!

Pasó la noche en la estación y por la mañana temprano se dirigió a la casa. En el cielo sin nubles se levantaba un sol otoñal que no se distinguía en nada de un sol de primavera.

Caminaba en una quietud solitaria y somnolienta. Sentía tal confusión que le parecía que su corazón, que lo había soportado todo, esta vez no resistiría. En aquellos minutos el mundo se había vuelto divinamente inmóvil; el dulce santuario de su infancia permanecía eterno, inmutable. En otro tiempo sus pies habían pisado aquellos guijarros frescos, sus ojos de niño habían escudriñado aquellas montañas redondeadas, tocadas por la rojiza herrumbre otoñal. Oyó a lo lejos el rumor del riachuelo que corría hacia el mar en medio de los desechos de la ciudad: cortezas de sandía y mazorcas de maíz roídas.

Un viejo abjasio, vestido con una camisa negra de satén ceñida con un cinturón fino de piel, pasó por la calle en dirección al mercado, llevando una cesta de castañas.

Tal vez de niño Iván Grigórievich hubiese comprado higos y castañas a ese

viejo de cabellos blancos, inmutable, atemporal. Y había el mismo viento matinal del sur, entre fresco y cálido, que olía a mar, y el cielo de la montaña, y el olor casero del ajo y de las rosas. Había las mismas casitas con los postigos cerrados, con las cortinas bajadas. Y había los mismos niños que cuarenta años atrás, niños que no habían crecido, y había los mismos viejos, viejos que no se habían ido a la tumba, que dormían detrás de los postigos cerrados.

Salió a la carretera y comenzó a subir por la montaña. El arroyo susurraba. Iván Grigórievich recordó su voz.

Nunca había visto su vida en toda su totalidad y he aquí que ahora se le había aparecido. Y viéndola no sintió rencor hacia la gente.

Todos —aquellos que le llevaron al despacho del juez instructor, empujándole con la culata del fusil; aquellos que no le dejaron dormir durante los interrogatorios, aquellos que cometieron la vileza de denunciarle en las asambleas del Partido, aquellos que habían renegado de él, aquellos que le robaron la ración de pan, aquellos que le habían pegado—, todos ellos, en su debilidad, en su brutalidad, crudeza, maldad, habían hecho el mal sin querer hacerle el mal.

Habían traicionado, calumniado, renegado porque, de no haberlo hecho, no habrían sobrevivido, estarían muertos. Pero con todo, eran hombres. ¿Acaso esa gente quería que él, viejo, solo, sin amor, volviese a su casa abandonada?

Esos hombres no deseaban el mal a nadie, pero habían hecho el mal durante toda su vida.

Y sin embargo esos hombres eran hombres. Y lo sorprendente, lo maravilloso es que, lo quisieran o no, ellos no habían dejado que la libertad muriese; incluso los más terribles la habían custodiado en sus horribles, deformes, pero siempre humanas almas.

En cuanto a él, no había logrado nada en la vida. No había escrito un libro, no había pintado un cuadro, no había hecho ningún descubrimiento. No había fundado una escuela ni un partido. No tenía discípulos.

¿Por qué había sido tan dura su vida? No había predicado, no había enseñado; había seguido siendo lo que era desde su nacimiento: un hombre.

La ladera de la montaña pareció abrirse, más allá del desfiladero comenzaron a vislumbrarse las copas de los robles. De niño se adentraba en la penumbra del bosque, examinaba las huellas de la desaparecida vida de los circasianos: los árboles de los huertos que se habían vuelto salvajes, los vestigios de las vallas alrededor de las viviendas.

Tal vez su hogar estuviese allí, idéntico, tan inmutable como inmutables le

habían parecido las calles y el arroyo.

Quedaba el último recodo del camino. Por un momento fue como si una luz nunca vista antes, increíblemente viva, inundase la tierra. Unos pasos más aún y en aquella luz vería su casa, y su madre se acercaría a él, hijo pródigo, y él se arrodillaría ante ella, y las jóvenes y bellas manos de ella se posarían sobre su cabeza calva y cana.

Vio los matorrales, los lúpulos. Ni casa, ni pozo: sólo algunas piedras blancas, dispersas en medio de la hierba polvorienta, quemada por el sol.

Permaneció allí, de pie: canoso, encorvado y aun así el mismo de antes, inalterable.

1955-1963

Notas a pie de página

[1] Comité de Planificación Estatal.

[2] República Socialista Federativa Soviética de Rusia.

[3] El pridúrok (pridurki, en plural) es, literalmente, «el que se hace el tonto». En jerga penitenciaria, eran los enchufados, los que evitaban los trabajos más duros.

[4] Diminutivo de Nikolái. Más adelante también se le llama Kolenka.

[5] Sociedad de la Unión Soviética para las Relaciones Culturales con el Extranjero.

[6] En ruso «guía», «caudillo». Término con que se solía designar a los secretarios generales del PCUS, en especial a Stalin.

[7] En el argot de los campos penitenciarios soviéticos, India se refiere al barracón de la chusma.

[8] Perros (suki): cofrades que han traicionado el código de honor aceptando trabajos prohibidos por el hampa, como ayudar a levantar muros de prisiones, colocar alambre de espino o dirigir brigadas de trabajo correctivo. Enemigos de los ladrones decentes, quienes los odian a muerte. Solzhenitsin explica detalladamente esta clasificación en Archipiélago Gulag.

[9] La «reclusión sin derecho a correspondencia» era el eufemismo oficial con el que se encubría la ejecución del arrestado.

[10] Organización antisemita de extrema derecha que emergió durante la revolución de 1905. Asesinó a revolucionarios y organizó atentados contra los intelectuales de izquierdas.

[11] Lisenko, Trofim Denísovich (1898—1976): agrónomo favorecido por Stalin y Jruschov. Fue presidente de la Academia de Agronomía. Detractor de la genética mendeliana. Sus oponentes, como el botánico Vavílov y el genetista Zhebrak, fueron objeto de campañas de desprestigio y perseguidos por oponerse a sus teorías.

[12] Literalmente, San Petersburgo, centro de desinfección.

[13] Gente antigua (*Bivshie liudi*): término con el que se hacía referencia a las élites políticas, sociales y económicas del antiguo régimen zarista y que incluía tanto a propietarios, dirigentes de Estado, sacerdotes, policía y otros oficiales

zaristas, así como a kulaks, comerciantes, molineros, etcétera.

[14] Héroe épico ruso.

[15] Inturist: organismo central para el turismo extranjero.

[16] Nombre que se dio en la Unión Soviética a las cooperativas que se encontraban bajo la responsabilidad de los productores. Éstos controlaban la producción de sus miembros; durante los primeros años de vida de la URSS, muchas funcionaban en realidad como empresas privadas encubiertas, sin regulación de horas y condiciones de trabajo y salarios. Existieron al menos hasta la década de 1960.

[17] El artículo 58 del Código Penal soviético promulgado en 1926 permitía clasificar a los detenidos políticos entre los comunes gracias a la amplia interpretación que se le puede aplicar a la acusación de «delitos contra el Estado». El artículo constaba de catorce puntos y contemplaba la pena capital.

[18] Siglas de Otdel Borbi s Jischéniami Sotsialistícheskoi Sóbstvennosti i Spekuliátsiei [Departamento para la lucha contra la malversación de la propiedad socialista y la especulación].

[19] Representantes de la policía política en el interior de un campo penitenciario.

[20] Término que se empleaba para referirse a los prisioneros medio muertos, desfallecientes.

[21] En argot penitenciario, recluso. Abreviatura de *zakliuchonni*.

[22] Extracto de té muy concentrado.

[23] Artículo 58, párrafo 6, cláusula 11 del Código Penal: «Traición a la Patria».

[24] Cuervo (*voronok*): furgones policiales negros destinados al transporte de detenidos.

[25] Botas de fieltro muy calientes, utilizadas tradicionalmente en invierno, primavera y otoño para no mojarse los pies cuando en la calle hay nieve medio derretida y barro.

[26] Dirección Política Estatal.

[27] Las estufas se utilizaban tanto como cocina como para caldear la estancia. La parte superior de la estufa era el lugar privilegiado de la casa para dormir caliente y se solía ceder a las personas enfermas o mayores.

[28] Nilcoláí Schors (1895-1919), héroe de la guerra civil en Ucrania.

[29] Juego de palabras. En ruso, el barril que se usa como urinario en las celdas

se llama *parasha*, de ahí que en et argot carcelario se llame *parasbiutist* (paracaidista) al que duerme al lado.

[30] Comités de campesinos pobres (*Komiteti bednatí*): organizados en la Rusia europea por decreto del Sovnarkom el 11 de junio de 1918, en muchas regiones se convirtieron en auténticos órganos de poder. Distribuían las tierras y aperos expropiados, requisaban el grano de los kulaks y se encargaban del llamamiento a filas. Disueltos entre diciembre de 1918 y enero de 1919.

[31] Gorro de paño de forma puntiaguda que utilizaban los soldados del i.° de Caballería del Ejército Rojo comandados por Semión Budioni.

[32] Estudiantes aristócratas anturevolucionarios hostiles al movimiento democrático y revolucionario de Rusia. Se les conocía con el sobrenombre de «los del forro blanco» por la entretela de seda blanca de sus abrigos.

[33] Dimutivo de Lev.

[34] Volodia es un diminutivo de Vladímir (Ilich Uliánov), Lenin; Tulin es otro seudónimo revolucionario que utilizó Lenin.

[35] Bebida refrescante tradicional, hecha a base de pan negro de centeno o harina de centeno fermentado.

[36] Kasha (gachas): cereales cocidos con agua o leche.

[37] Fragmentos de *Las almas muertas* de Gógol.

[38] Campesinos libres que poseían tierras.

[39] Canciones populares de marineros y soldados durante la Revolución y la guerra civil.

[40] Acrónimo de *Proletárskaya Kultura* [Cultura proletaria]. Bajo ese nombre se aglutinaban diversas organizaciones artístico— literarias que surgieron en vísperas de la Revolución de Octubre con el fin de desarrollar la actividad artística del proletariado fuera de influencias burguesas.

[41] Proverbio ruso que significa «a cada cual, lo suyo».

[42] Cuerpo de policía estatal que instauró un régimen de terror; creado por Iván el Terrible.

[43] Maliuta Skurátov (¿-1573), uno de los líderes más odiados de la opríchnina. En 1570 llevó a cabo una expedición punitiva a Nóvgorod que se saldó con el asesinato de miles de ciudadanos sospechosos de traición.

[44] Verdadero nombre de Stalin.